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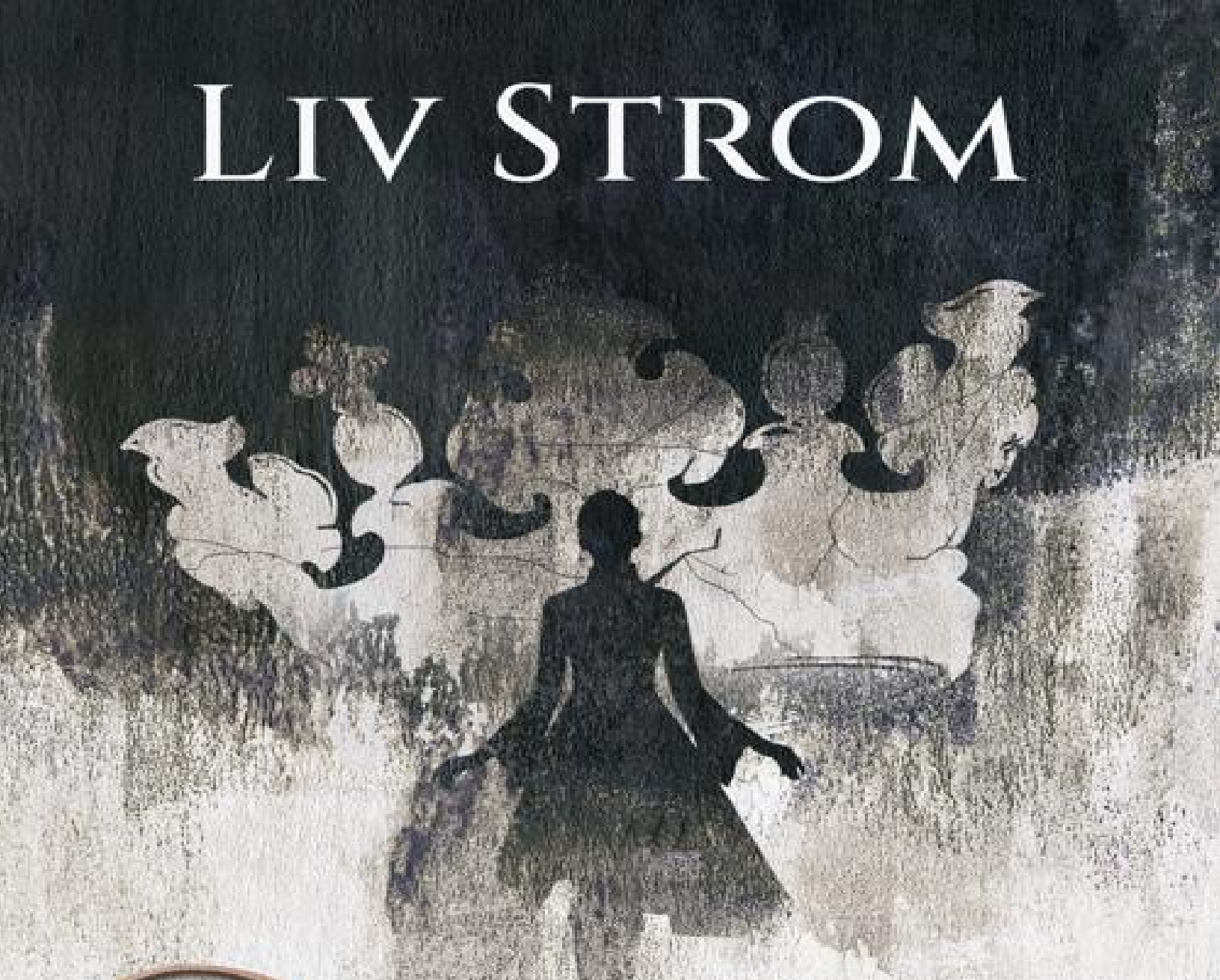

CLAIMING GLASS

TALES OF BONES & ROSES 2

A CINDERELLA RETELLING

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- Ansa & Alexei – Unlocking Fire: A Bluebeard Retelling Novella (2023)
- Vanya & Dimitri – Stealing Glass: A Cinderella Retelling #1 (2023)
- Vanya & Dimitri – Claiming Glass: A Cinderella Retelling #2 (2024)
- *Ansa & Alexei – Spinning Fire: A Rumpelstiltskin Retelling*
- *Lumi & Damyon – A Snow White Retelling*
- *Mariska & Kazimir – A Little Red Riding Hood Retelling*
- *Lana & Nikolai – A Beauty and the Beast Retelling*

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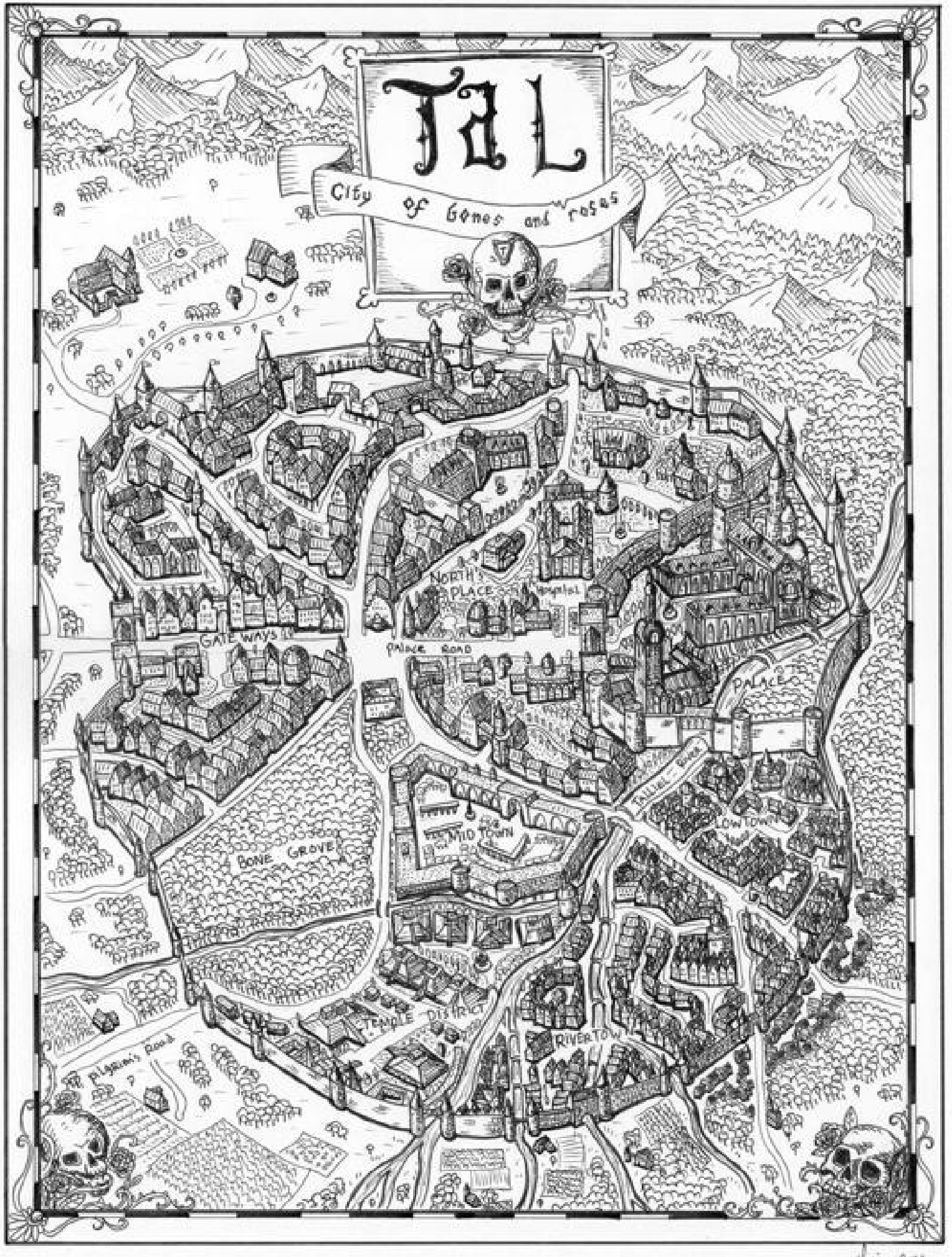
Ansa & Alexei – Returning Home (2023 – set between Unlocking Fire and Stealing Glass) https://dl.bookfunnel.com/sxn3u3uzf7

The king's son danced with her alone, and when another asked her [for a dance], the prince said: "This is *my* dancer."

Der Königssohn tanzte ganz allein mit ihm, und wenn es einer aufforderte, sprach er: "Das ist *meine* Tänzerin."

Aschenputtel (Cinderella) by Brothers Grimm

City of Bones and Roses


TdL
City of Bones and roses
NORTH'S PLACE
Hospital
GATE WAYS
Palace Road
PALACE
MID TOWN
LOW TOWN
BONE GROVE
TEMPLE DISTRICT
RIVERTOWN
Pilgrim's Road

Royals

- Dimitri Alexandre Ivanov – Crown Prince of Tal
- Nikolai Alexandre Radanov – Prince of Tal
- Mariska Yelena Radanova – Princess of Tal
- Yelena Solovyova – Dowager queen of Tal
- Ivan Gregorious III – King of Tal
- Inessa Yustina – Queen of Tal
- Rada – Prince of Tal, father of Nikolai and Mariska
- Helia von Heskin – Princess of Oberwalden
- Flora von Heskin – Oberwaldian noblewoman

Nobles

- Alexei Semyon Yurievich – Second son of a Talian country lord
- Von Mekelns – Talian noble couple
- Ekatarina Kuznetsova – Talian noblewoman
- Stasia von Lemerch – Talian noblewoman, councilor
- Sophina Dorova – Talian noblewoman, councilor
- Savva Novikov – Talian nobleman, councilor
- Mar Heridan – Talian nobleman, councilor
- Florentiy Makarov – Talian nobleman, councilor
- Castle Osipova – Talian nobleman, councilor
- Prokhor Bersig – Talian nobleman, councilor
- Kazimir Bersigov – Bersig's grandson
- Urs von Uster – Talian nobleman, head of the Roja, councilor
- Nataliya von Paran – Wife of the head of the Merchant's Guild

Commoners

- Vanya Komovara – Thief
- Lumi Komovara – Thief
- Komara Gorgiana Hereova – High-priced courtesan
- Kirill Anatolievich – Moneylender
- Svetlana Kirillovna – Kirill's daughter
- Grigori – Kirill's enforcer
- Popova – Lowtown business owner, suspected mage of unknown variety
- Fyodor Popovanov – One of Popova's sons
- Maksim – One of Popova's grandson's, sigil crafter
- Pyre – Fire bearer

- Orso – Safe cracker
- Esfir – Courtesan

Others

- Morovara – High Priestess of the Death Goddess
- Gennady – Royal healer
- Zakhar – Former palace guard
- Koshka – Talian bone soldier and griffon rider
- Yahontov – Talian member of the Roja

Important historical figures

- Ealhswip – Last divine ruler of Tal, High Priestess of the Death Goddess
- Eydis – Ealhswip's daughter, not by Herebov, first High Priestess to not rule
- Herebov – Vsadnik clan war chief, first King of Tal
- Yelena – Herebov's second wife

Neighborhoods of Tal

- The Royal Palace
- North's Place
- Gateways
- Bone Grove
- Temple District
- Midtown
- Rivertown
- Lowtown
- Ramparts (outside city wall)

Recorded Mages

- Fire bearer – also known as known as explosions
- Wind whisperer – also known as weather mages
- Water seer – also known as seers
- Earth mover – also known as growers
- Sigil crafter – controlled by the Sigil Guild
- Matter manipulator – also known as telekinetics
- Hope holder – also known as healers

- Heart turner – also known as mind witches
- Death keeper – also known as necromancers

Dimitri

I lay on Alexei's empty bed, surrounded by the remnants of his life. The fire—a direct result of the orders I had given to halt the plague—had not only damaged the fields outside Tal, destroyed part of the city, and killed hundreds, but had also stolen my oldest friend.

He had lived here since we left the Tower at thirteen, accumulating knickknacks and memories. I had not visited since returning to Tal. Alexei had always come to me. Been there for me. But now that he was dead, I came to him asking for his advice.

"So, the woman you encouraged me to give a chance is a fraud," I said, imagining him listening. "Somehow, she fooled us all. And now I'm fool enough to wish I could have lived in ignorance a while longer. Was she playing with me this whole time? The only true thing I have of hers is a shoe."

Alexei would have mocked me mercilessly for mistaking a Lowtown woman, a poor commoner from what she had shown me, for a princess, because after I introduced her to the court, who would question it?

I should have known when she stole the crown. When she tried to kiss me. When she waited for me in my locked chambers. And Eki had tried to kill her, hinting she knew Helia was not a princess at all.

Not Helia. Not Princess. Not even Oberwaldian.

I should have realized no princess, no matter how practical, would have worn old leather boots. I flipped through my journal, wanting to tear out each of her images, drawn on long nights when I could not get her face out of my mind. I should burn it.

Of course, she had known how to play King's Conquest. I cringed, realizing she'd understood my inappropriate words at breakfast that first morning. Later, her boldly marching into my bedchamber in front of servants and soldiers and councilors had seemed a statement. A show of strength from a foreign woman set to be queen, displaying how little she cared about rumors. Someone who chose her own path.

It had been the opposite.

The Oberwaldians were surely in on the ruse, for Flora von Heskin knew her niece. By the time she nodded along, I would never have questioned it. So why had the woman revealed herself?

"Did she save me in Lowtown or doom you?" The memories were pain-filled hallucinations of Alexei's blood-splattered face in the mud interlaced with dreams of dancing.

She had come into my life like a tempest, disrupting careful plans and frozen emotions. Even now, she was tossing me around.

Wind spun my friend's letters and belongings into the air, my magic mirroring my internal state. Like a barely trained mage, I'd let my emotions rule me. When I brought her into the princess's chambers, I had mocked her for trying to make me lose control. How wrong I had been for thinking I ever had any.

I raised a bottle of Alexei's finest wine to the empty room, drank deep, and cursed myself and the Wishmaker for letting me think I had found someone I could be myself with. Cursed myself for letting my guard down and, despite the lies, longing for her lavender scent and hungry kisses.

Talking to her had been like flying Cherny above the clouds where each unexpected gust could bring me down, and each look could make my stomach drop.

Would she have enjoyed flying pressed against me? She had said she feared the griffons too much to learn in Oberwalden. Another lie. Why torture myself with impossible conjectures? The real question was what I would tell my father.

"You should be here laughing at me," I said to the empty room, knowing I was rambling.

My princess stared out from the journal page—the first drawing from the night I caught her. Or she caught me. I gripped the

edge, ready to tear it off. Held it there until my fingers cramped before letting go. She still had me, damn her.

The real Helia's portrait remained on the mantel back in my chambers, her large eyes following my every move.

Surely my father's Roja had sought me there already. I was supposed to lead the investigation into the missing food after I had done so well with finding the stolen crown. But the real crown still sat in my bedchamber closet next to the incriminating shoe. Unable to decide what to do with either, they remained constant reminders of the previous month's events. I could not even bring the crown to the treasury under the Women's Tower myself—as the only man allowed inside was the king—so it would remain hidden until the wedding when I, somehow, would exchange them.

Wedding.

Did the imposter in the princess's chambers still intend to marry me? Why had she done this? How?

And the shoe…

She needed to answer my questions.

I stuffed the journal in my coat pocket, heaved myself to my feet and left Alexei's room and the bottle behind. The tempest would talk.

Halfway to the royal wing, a servant rushed up, too hurried to bow.

"Majesty, you must come—outside—it's the princess."

A hand clenched around my heart. What had happened? Had my father somehow found out? Had Eki tried to harm her again?

I was running before the man could catch his breath enough to explain.

The rain brought by my curse and magic had finally halted, but dark clouds still hung over the city and puddles covered the courtyard.

Nobles and servants alike stood in the palace entrance, staring out through the open grand doors. In the courtyard, someone was arguing next to a black, unmarked carriage.

The crowd split. My steps slowed.

I blinked, wondering how much I had drunk, when the woman—a slightly plumper, taller, worse-for-wear princess with impeccable bearing and irate expression—turned to face me.

I had stared at her portrait for too long to mistake her. Still, my confused greeting came out like a question.

"Princess Helia von Heskin?"

She strode up to me, offering her hand like a businessman. "Dimitri Ivanov. Finally, someone who can clear this up. Tell them I'm your bride."

She looked at me expectantly, hand hanging in the air. I had already been through this. Could not do it again. This time, without my best friend.

Was this woman in on it with the tempest? How could she not be, considering she arrived the day after her replacement revealed herself? Perhaps their only aim was to drive me insane. I wished I had finished the bottle.

All watched us—more passing nobles drawn to the standstill each moment that lapsed.

Thoughts and feelings raced each other while my face remained impassive, and I accepted her hand. There was nothing else to do.

"Of course. Let me walk you to your chambers." I placed her hand on my arm, and, ignoring everyone and their questions, strode back inside the palace. Leaning close to this stranger, I whispered, "What's this ploy?"

Helia waved her hand and a courtier lingering close enough to listen in was pushed a step back. I had not been in her presence a quarter bell and her magic use already confirmed her identity. This woman did not *act* likea princess. She was one and had never questioned it.

"This is me arriving in your city only to be kidnapped after expressing my reservations for the marriage to my aunt, then be woken with a kiss from a stranger at the palace gates. It would be safe to say you probably know more than me."

"I know everyone lies."

She scoffed. "Of course, this is court."

"Your aunt has been here for a month, together with your luggage and a woman claiming to be you." I looked sideways, pain shooting through me as I remembered the previous night. "The resemblance is remarkable."

"Did she have a scar?"

The parts of Tempest I had seen flashed through my mind—neck and legs, arms and chest, hidden freckles I longed to kiss and delicate skin. I cleared my throat. "Several, but old and unremarkable. Why?"

"Just a thought." She gave me a too-knowing look as we arrived at the princess's chambers.

"Well, you don't have to wonder. These are hers—your—rooms, and she should be inside."

Pausing until a servant had passed, I opened the unlocked door without knocking. My chest clenched and temples throbbed. At least there would be answers.

The room stood empty.

"Princess," I called. Helia gave me a long look, but what other name was I supposed to use? I could not very well call her Helia or Tempest.

First, I thought no one answered. Then a muffled sound came from her bedchamber. Yesterday, I would not have hesitated to enter. I had spent days at her bedside as she recovered from magic overuse. She had spent a night in my bed. The time together kept replaying in my mind, each touch and kiss catalogued. Her body a partly-drawn map, and I longed to fill in the undiscovered parts.

"After you, for propriety," I said to Helia, pointing at the closed bedchamber door, and putting off the confrontation a moment longer.

Helia waved her hand dismissively. The door flew open with a crash, cracking the wood. Unconcerned, the real princess entered.

"Well, well, well. It's a welcome gift. I don't know who your *princess* is, Ivanov, but I think I like her."

Cautiously, I stuck my head around the doorway.

Whatever I had expected, it was not this. Flora von Heskin and the Oberwaldian maid lay on the floor, tied to a bedpost each. Through gags made from torn sheets, Flora tried to talk to Helia, who stood above her with a smile that told me to keep my distance.

For a moment, she looked like my princess—dangerous and wild. I shook my head and turned to the maid, disappointed and relieved that her mistress seemed to have been forewarned of Helia's arrival.

As this woman had been left behind tied to the bed, it probably meant she knew nothing of use, but she was the only one available to answer my questions.

The maid hid her face and gag under her blond hair. Carefully, in case she decided to bite, I brushed it aside.

Her eyes met mine in defiance.

I had seen her many times. She was objectively pretty, but to me, forgettable.

That was no longer true.

Her lips turned my stomach, her cheeks and nose made me stagger back. She had not changed but looking at her, slimy things seemed to crawl down my back.

Struggling not to throw up, I blindly removed her gag.

"What happened to you?" I forced the words out through clenched teeth and turned away.

As soon as I could no longer see her, my body settled. This was not natural.

"Curse," she spit out. "She cursed me."

"Who?"

"Vanya Komarova. The one you've been unable to take your eyes off this last month. She had more gumption than I gave her credit for."

So, Tempest had a name. *Vanya*. I rolled it on my tongue, knowing I should hate it. How many times had I called her *Princess* or *Helia* as she grinned in response? I should despise every part of her as much as this woman's cursed face. Hearing her name should not have eased the pain in my chest.

"Do you know the name?" I asked Helia, who shook her head.

The maid grunted. "She's no one and now she's long gone. She always talked of running."

Lying in my arms, my princess had told me as much. Did she lie to everyone, or was this the truth? Perhaps a ploy within a ploy to achieve something I could not fathom? King's Conquest revealed how people thought—some, like me, played a calculated long game, some uncaringly discarded their pieces, and others strove for a quick win. Vanya had played impatiently, reacting to my every move with innovative maneuvers, but never seemed coldly calculating. She burned hot, moved with her feet barely touching the ground, and fought without holding back.

"She's from Lowtown?" I asked, testing the memory she'd shared of sitting on a roof watching the stars barely visible between the neighboring tenements.

"Not originally. Release me, and I'll lead you to where she lived."

You needed to read someone's face to question them. Because of the curse, I could only go by the woman's irate voice. I hesitated. She had been part of a month-long deception, assisted a girl impersonate royalty, possibly helped to kidnap the real princess.

Every principle instilled in me since birth told me she needed to be arrested and brought before the court. But then I might lose my chance at answers and expose the deception to not only the Council I hated but the entire city. Would my father step down if there was another scandal? Would there even be a wedding?

My head spun, and I sat heavily on the bed.

"Let her go, if you want to, but I'm keeping my aunt. The last thing I remember is talking to her," Helia said, watching the still-bound Flora. "I especially like how this Vanya tied the fingers together to prevent her from getting free through magic. Seems my double wasn't incompetent."

I sighed. She certainly was not. Tempest had had me so enthralled I'd considered leaving both revenge and kingdom behind.

"How many would challenge it if we don't acknowledge the deception until we have more answers?" Helia asked and turned away from Flora. "The girl must have looked a lot like me for it to work."

"She could have been your sister."

The Oberwaldian princess tilted her head in a way so familiar my heart ached. "As far as I know, I only have brothers."

She might have said more, but a knock interrupted us.

Helia marched to answer while I closed the bedchamber door. No matter what I decided, no one needed to see people tied up in the princess's rooms. I did not care whose reputation I was protecting anymore.

A servant bowed in the doorway, first to Helia, then me. "The King summons you both to attend him."

Of course he did. My father always knew how to catch me off guard. Probably von Uster, the spymaster, Council member, and head of the Roja, had informed him of the situation in the courtyard.

I expected Helia to demand time to wash and dress before meeting the King of Tal, but she only asked to be shown the way, pulling me along in her wake without quip or question.

Despite their similar looks, Vanya and Helia were very different people. It made it easier somehow. Neither was meek, but this woman did not challenge me. She ran me over. I could imagine her commanding armies and brokering deals. She made me want to step aside and let her handle the whole mess. There was no instant attraction, no push and pull and inscrutable looks.

Introducing Helia to my father, the past and present overlapped. In the same chair, gaunter and coughing, he ranted while she listened before snapping that it was certainly not *her fault* someone kidnapped her just outside *his city*. He retorted I was in charge of eradicating the bandit problem, as if he had not given me this task only last night.

Helia then declared she intended to move into the Women's Tower, as it was the safest place in Tal. My father waved his hand, making it Solovyova's problem that only Talian noble women were allowed to reside there.

At no time did Helia mention the involvement of her aunt. My father did not seem to care who I married, only that the water seer tested this woman as well to ensure her powerful enough to strengthen the weakened magic in our bloodline.

No one asked me a single question.

I bowed when we entered and when we left. Only when my father demanded I also—quietly—find the impostor and hand her over, did something in me rebel. I wanted to punish Tempest for her deception but no one else would lay a hand on her. But I had intended to search either way.

If the maid was right, Vanya was long gone and my wants mattered little, so I did not argue with my father, and when Helia demanded I arrange for rooms in the Tower afterward, I sent servants to do just that, relieved she did not expect me to woo her. Every time I looked at her, I saw another's face.

I should want her—Vanya. Tempest. Princess—hanged.

I was angry and hurt. I could admit as much to myself. Embarrassed and, when I let my thoughts wander, drowning in grief.

On the way back to Helia's chambers, I decided to let the maid go. My father had given me the guards and coin to investigate inside the city and the steppes beyond. Having one woman followed should be easy enough.

Alone again in Helia's outer chamber, I hesitated. Too much was up in the air and though I wanted nothing more than to hide in Alexei's room, orders needed to be issued, appearances kept up.

"So do you want to marry?" I asked from the doorway. I still needed the wedding. After my father's show of power last night, I needed it more than ever.

"No," Helia called from the bedroom. "Are you coming?"

Instead of explaining how I did not want to taint my memories of these chambers, how I wanted nothing more than to hide and forget, I followed her inside. It remained how we'd left it, captives and all.

"Then why are you here?" I asked. Growing up, I'd been told the Oberwaldian mountain princess would be fortunate to have me—for who did not want to be Queen of Tal? Many, seemed to be the answer.

Helia stared down at her tousled aunt. "My mother swore when I left that if I could convince Tal to void the marriage contract, she wouldn't push it. But arguing with the king would get me nowhere."

"Three years ago, I wrote to Oberwalden requesting we break the contract." A shadow of the anger I once felt boiled up in me. They were the reason I could not marry Eki openly. That I could not protect our child.

"Yes. *You* did. Not the king or queen. What choice do you or I have?" She sighed and from the sympathy in her eyes, I knew she had heard at least some of what happened three years ago.

"So, you'll convince the queen?" I scoffed. "My mother has many strengths, but she never goes against my father openly."

Helia grinned. "Why do you think I requested to stay in the Tower? I've heard only Solovyova rules there, and when she decides something, even the king follows."

I nodded slowly. It was not a bad plan. If anyone could convince my father, it would be my grandmother. A part of me wished her luck. I had known revenge would not be free but had not anticipated those closest to me would be the ones to pay the price.

Alexei… Mariska and Eki could not go the same way.

"As my father said, I must search the city and countryside for robbers and pretend princesses," I said, needing to leave these rooms and memories. "I'll release the maid at the eighth bell. What do you want me to do with your aunt?"

"Could you arrange for a private prison cell where no one asks questions?"

The proposal shocked even me, who'd plotted for years to kill those who wronged me. Tal's prison was famous for the

horrors its walls hid. To send a noble lady there… but I had told Helia I'd do what she wanted with her aunt.

"If that's what you desire."

It seemed no matter what I wanted, busy days lay ahead. Perhaps I should let them make me forget Alexei's death, and erase Vanya's haunting green eyes and drawn face as she revealed she deceived me all along. But I had never been good at letting something lie. There was no reason I could not find my own answers while following my father's orders. After meeting the assigned riders and organizing the search outside Tal, I would take charge of the one inside. It was time to get to truly know my city and citizens, starting with retracing Alexei's final steps.

Three years ago, I planned my wedding in secret, believing love would conquer all. Death and years of grief proved me wrong. When I was finally allowed to return to Tal, I thought I held all the advantages. Marrying the princess of Oberwalden would be easy for I cared only for my revenge. It seemed I might have been even more naive than the first time I promised to wed.

But wedding or not, before the Day of the Dead and end of summer, I needed to find answers for I refused to be only a game piece in the largest King's Conquest I had ever played.

Vanya

Lumi was not on the Rivertown barges.

The hawkers had not seen her, nor had the beggars at the Bone Grove or priestesses outside the black temples. I searched the night market in Midtown, watched her favorite food stalls and gambling tables.

With magic, I listened to each answer, searching for deception.

The people in Lowtown we used to greet every day only shook their heads when I asked, then gave me strange looks when they thought I did not see.

A little girl pulled at my coat hem, asking if I'd called the griffon that landed and the rain that saved their house. Her parents hushed her with fear in their eyes.

I had done something impossible. Revealed I had magic and, in their minds, was bound to become insane sooner or later. There were no more smiles. No requests for me to watch my former neighbors' children for a few bells.

As soon as I convinced myself I had done everything I could, I moved on to streets where no one knew me.

What I did find—on walls and stalls, under cups, and on pamphlets—was a bloody stick figure calling for blood. In whispers, people told of restless Spirits and how the royals were to blame for the rising food prices. Of attacked farmsteads and how no one would have dared such action if the Death Goddess still watched over Tal. How the fire and plague outbreak were the royal's fault or the Goddess's punishment. With even lower voices, in alleys and shadows, they spoke of the dead walking at night.

They said on the Day of the Dead, the Death Goddess would bless the faithful.

The city filled with more people each day. A perfect place to disappear.

The magic swirled through me, impossible to shut off.

Lumi, I whispered to it. Nothing answered. *I'm coming for you, and we'll solve this. You're the one who lied to me. I'm not leaving.*

Maybe my words reached her. Maybe it was a prayer to the Wishmaker that after we screamed and laughed, hugged and fought, all would be well again.

I imagined her face, like a mirror of my own. Though that was no longer true. With the cut hair, two-year-old scar splitting her lip, and gaunt hardness, she was what I could have been. Instead, the palace had treated me well, adding curves to my fit form, and untangling my hair. I still wore the red lip tint, though I knew I should have left it behind with all the other riches.

Despite my commitment not to steal, I had brought one golden plate from the palace and sold it at the night market my first day, then splurged on two new shirts, instructing the seamstress to make the sleeves extra-long to hide the Oberwaldian noble's sigil on my forearm. As soon as the fall winds came, I could wear gloves. For now, I hoped no one would notice an accidental peek of the dark blue and black lines swirling up my arm from wrist to elbow.

The last five years there had only been one place we had called home, and after three days of searching, I could no longer avoid it.

No matter how unlikely it was my sister would have left anything behind on Mandible Street, I needed to know. It was dangerous to go back after leaving my stepsister orphaned, bound, and cursed, but walking street after street, asking strangers, was not without its own risks. If Lumi wanted to stay hidden, it would not endear me to her if her disappearance and my search was market talk.

My feet led me back along the muddy streets. Instead of calling out greetings to the women chatting at the fountain or teasing the children, I stayed to the shadows before climbing Kirill's back gate and, like so many other nights, quickly scurried up to our attic window.

Even in winter, I left it open for it had been my escape. But it was no longer mine.

Bats chatted, long used to my presence, as I dug my fingernails into the wood frame. It did not budge. Someone had latched it on the inside. Did they expect me to come here? Or had Kirill done it before he died?

I slid down and hid in the dark courtyard, knowing I should leave but unable to let go of the past.

Lights shone on the first floor. I crept closer. My stepsister had her back to me as she wrote in Kirill's old study and ledger.

I settled behind a thornless rose bush—one of Kirill's many shows of wealth—and waited.

Masked, my stepsister conducted business, seemingly taking over where Kirill left it without missing a beat. While I had not expected grief, this was also strange. The beautiful etched scales wrought in silver covered half her face and matched her ornate dress, showing only her kohl-lined eyes and painted mouth. She would stay covered until she could love someone more than herself. From watching her, the curse would never be broken.

Serves her right, a petty voice inside me said, while my mother's softer one told me you cannot make a right with two wrongs. That I had to let go of the past to make something of tomorrow. Shame heated my cheeks.

"It's not that easy," I mumbled to myself, talking to the long dead after only three days of solitude.

After two bells of spying on Lana, without a sign of royal guards, von Lemerch, or any other danger, she finally left the house.

Time to break in. Time to finally let go.

I shattered the kitchen window with a coat-wrapped fist. Normally, I would never have been so bold—Lumi and I had been better thieves than this—but I lacked lock picks and time. And if my stepfather had claimed me as family in anything but name, a third of everything here would have been mine. Lumi and I had certainly worked hard enough to earn it.

Inside, the house was as dead as its owner.

Still, I stepped lightly. For too long, Kirill's house had been a place to not be seen.

After filling half my bag with food from the kitchen, I snuck up the central stairs, skipping the creaking step automatically. Last time I was here, Lumi lay beaten on the carpet and von Lemerch cursed me to silence while making her offer. Somehow, I had dared to hope despite her unnaturally burning eyes.

My muscles tensed, ready to flee.

This place was no longer my home.

I closed my eyes, reminding myself there was a chance, no matter how small, that Lumi was here. My magic sang of an empty house, except for a mouse or two in the pantry, but perhaps she could hide from it like she had hid so much else.

Either way, I was safe. Tense, I continued.

There were three rooms on the second floor—Svetlana's, Kirill's, and a sitting room used for rare guests. At the end of the hallway stood a ladder leading into the attic. Lumi and I had shared it since the debt sigils appeared on our thighs and Kirill claimed us. Now the dark mark was gone, and a strapped-on leather bag carrying a letter I should never have stolen sat in its place—obligation replacing debt. Not to a moneylender, but to Dimitri, or perhaps Tal, because the letter inside held truths about the plague that belonged to all.

I climbed into a room barely high enough to stand in, the black sloped ceiling childishly painted with imaginary constellations and mountains. Two mattresses lay side by side. Dresses and coats hung in the back on a string. A small shelf completed our paltry furniture.

There were no obvious answers. Even our hideaway under the loose board was emptied—either by my stepsister or Lumi. The eternal hope in my chest deflated. Eyes burning, a clump that had nothing to do with von Lemerch's silencing curse lodged in my throat. The heat made the air heavy to breathe. That was it. I just needed air.

Unlatching and opening a window barely large enough for me to escape through, I leaned outside. My sister was out there. I would find her, scream at her for all her secrecy, and embrace her and never let go.

I longed to just climb out and escape.

For years, the evening breeze had been my only luxury. Usually in Tal, the higher up you slept the more privileged you were, but the attic had been too small for Kirill and Lana. Before dawn, I used to climb onto the roof and let the wind wrap around me, lifting my hair to feel it against my neck, and dream of the sea. The image of Dimitri moving in the dilapidated courtyard, the wind twisting with him, squeezed my heart further. Even my old pleasures and places where he'd never go, were no longer mine.

I had no time for this.

After tearing through Lumi's possessions and pocketing the few things of meaning—a book on Talian history, a silver-plated bird that had been our mother's, two strange contraptions of cogs and wire—I faced my own things. Time was running out.

I still wore the *borrowed* servant coat and pants—I was determined to return them, for I was no longer the thief I'd been forced to become.

Lana could return at any moment and notice the broken window. But I needed other clothes if I was to blend in, and this was the only place I would not need to steal them.

I changed into threadbare gray pants that fit just right, boots worn thin and molded to my feet, and a once-black coat cut at my waist and decorated with red embroidery for luck—only keeping the new shirt on.

Before I left, I had longed for the fine dresses of the nobility and hid my jealousy of Lana's things from my sister. Never would I have thought I would find such comfort in my worn possessions. In clothing made for a boy, patched before it reached my hands. The only thing that did not fit was the leather bag Flora gave me. The fine workmanship and shiny buckles would stand out without a skirt to cover it, but it was a reminder that I had returned the crown—proof that I had been a princess, had a prince, fallen, and been caught. And secured around my thigh, the letter safe inside the satchel could not be stolen.

While stuffing a change of clothes into my bag, the step I had avoided creaked below. I froze, fear at being caught in this house instilled in me through slaps and added debts.

The magic sped out with the pounding of my heart.

Anger and frustration.

Loneliness.

It took me longer to recognize Lana's meandering steps than it should have. Perhaps, because the emotions were not what I usually saw on her face.

I stuffed the servant's clothes into the bag, unwilling to leave any traces behind, and crept to the window. As I unlatched it with an unavoidable snap, the steps stopped.

She could not overpower me, having not completed a day of physical labor in her life. That did not mean this was a confrontation I wanted to have if I could avoid it.

I slipped out the window as I heard a foot on the ladder.

What would her face look like now? The curse…

The top of her head appeared as I grabbed the roof ledge, pulled myself up, and kicked the window closed.

Before confirming if she had seen me, I dashed across the shingles, wishing that Kirill had gone for a flat roof instead of this show of money. Over the notch, I slid down on the other side, jumped to the stable, dropped to the street, and hurried away from Lowtown.

I was alone—without family or friends—in a city full of angry people with nothing more than my bag. I needed time to think. A place to hide. No more running or hiding in alleys and courtyards. No more being pushed and pulled.

Crossing the first bridge into Rivertown, I grabbed a handful of red mud and rubbed it over the pristine satchel. I was no longer a thief, but there was one place I had broken into, taking only music. One place that centered me like no other.

There should be a show tonight and knowing Dimitri was probably spending the time with his true bride, I needed the distraction.

After maneuvering through the night crowds, veering from Spirits, city guards, and speakers on soapboxes clamoring for change, I crossed Palace Road, passed the courthouse, and arrived at the one place that, no matter how low I felt, made me soar.

The Royal Theater stood tall, its façade the black stone of ancient Tal. But I knew that just like me it was playing dress-up. Beyond the front, the building was new and white. When I was little, they laid the final stone on top of the old ruins.

Since I learned to climb, I had scaled the ground floor's iron-covered windows to reach the first balcony. After that, sneaking inside was easy.

Tonight, the windows were dark, doors locked with a plaque posted across them. Pretending casual interest, I read: *Closed by royal command. Plague Protocol 30.2*.

Something crumpled inside me. The lies had stolen even the music from Tal.

Numb, I made the climb anyway.

Upstairs, the balcony door, which had never been locked before, blocked me from entering. For the second time in one night, my fist crashed through glass. This time, something broken inside me awoke. Anger at the world. At the lies and something I loved becoming another casualty in another's war. *What else would I lose?*

Walking up the polished stone steps, the theater's domes seemed to float above; the stained-glass ceiling and bright moon outside created art across the white walls. Only my shadow broke the kaleidoscope.

Once, I dreamt of dancing on the great stage. And realizing nothing held me back anymore, I spun and leapt up the steps. The magic inside me strained outward to envelop the people hurrying past outside, growing until Tal and I were one. It was easier than it had been before I broke my curse on the streets of Lowtown. Was it killing Kirill or saving Dimitri that made a difference? Maybe I would never know.

Reaching the top floor, I exited onto the flat roof and lay down.

Above, the stars shone without answers.

When our mother stayed away for the night, when we still lived in Upper Midtown and knew little of life, Lumi and I used to climb up the ladder from our balcony and watch the stars above and rowdy streets below.

That was where we first made the plans to leave Tal behind, deciding I would be a dancer and Lumi an inventor. She had always been building something back then. Maybe that was why I loved the high places. All that stopped when the plague came and Mother died.

No.

At least alone, I would acknowledge the truth.

"When they murdered her." The words felt strange on my tongue. "When they *poisoned* her."

The letter I stole from the king's rooms claimed the Talian plague was a poison. This was why the healers could not cure it. Why we did not know how it spread. Someone was killing the population—especially mages—and I had a good guess at who. Why would von Lemerch command me to steal it, if it did not implicate her?

Had my mother been an intended victim or had it been one of her suitors? Had she ingested the poison during a summer party? Inhaled? Could touch be enough? I would never know. Had I not seen her name in the Book of Bloodlines, I would have laughed at the idea of someone seemingly responsible for the decades-long calculated murder of hundreds targeting her.

We had spent too long dismissing our mother for the tales she told and life she chose.

I traced the noble sigil on my wrist.

By right, I should have had a smaller one. So should my mother.

In the treasury deep under the Women's Tower, the Book of Bloodlines, which documented the births and deaths of the nobility, had confirmed our family's lineage. The story of how we had fallen, that my great-grandmother was the High Priestess of Bones, had been one of the many tales our mother never shared. It stung to find a truth and still have no answers.

That seemed to be life.

Things happened. People did things. And hardly ever did I find the *why*.

I hugged my knees and let the infinite sky embrace me. Old gods, so far away they were but pinpricks, stared down. Were they leaving us for something better?

Lumi Komarova, I silently said to the gods, hoping they might carry my words to her and make her stop ignoring me. *Sister, other side of my Spirit. We need to talk.*

The magic spiraled out of me, past the people bartering, partying, and arguing below. I pushed it down the bond that let me find my twin sister during the fire.

The stream grew into a river as I let go.

"Don't ignore me."

Nothing.

The bats squeaked as they returned home.

The palace glittered like marcasite when the first rays of sun hit it. Below me, Tal was going to sleep, the palace waking up. How could they understand us if we did not even inhabit the same parts of the day?

Leaning against the cupolas of the Royal Theater's roof terrace, I broke my fast on the bread I took from Mandible Street. I could hide here, in the theater attic, among old costumes and props during the day. Search for Lumi and a way to reach Dimitri during the night. Surely von Lemerch had more pressing concerns than tracking me down. Especially as her silencing curse still held.

After reading the letter I carried everywhere in the bag strapped to my thigh, I could have run to Dimitri, begged him to trust the words and me, despite having revealed I was a fraud. Hope and lorists' tales of love overcoming all had told me to do it. If my sister had not been delivering the real princess to the palace that morning, I might have tried. Not even the Wishmaker could have made him listen to a word I had to say after Helia von Heskin revealed she had been kept prisoner by my twin.

It seemed all my life, I had pretended to be someone else. Ironically, the stolen moments alone with the prince during the previous month had been the most genuine of my life. Not that he would believe that anymore.

How he left after I could not even give him my name replayed for the thousandth time in my mind. The confusion in his mismatched eyes had transformed into betrayal. Face closed as he retreated.

I had been honest, shown him my most precious memories, and it had pushed him away.

Perhaps, with the real glass crown and Helia now in his possession, it would be like I had never been a princess. Like we had not fought and kissed, shared secrets and touches. Just an impossible dream I had woken from. If only I could be sure this was enough to disrupt von Lemerch's plans to take the throne and kill him.

It had been the right thing to do. His resulting rejection understandable. Or so I told myself every time my chest constricted, and regret filled me. I still had to reveal the letter's contents to him. Somehow find a way for him to trust it.

Could the magic reach him in the distant palace? It was a foolish desire, a wish fueled by shared moments I could not forget no matter how he must hate me now. I sighed and turned from the glittering palace windows to the equally distant stars.

Before I left, I had questioned Flora von Heskin, my pretend aunt, and though she had not revealed much, it was enough. Von Lemerch had promised her the prominent place of Talian ambassador if she incapacitated Helia, the real princess set to marry my prince.

She had told me the royal Oberwaldian sigil on Helia's arm, a copy of which decorated my own, would have informed Helia's mother, the Head of her House, if she died, and possibly even roughly where she was. Helia had wanted to break off the engagement, and von Lemerch could not allow that to happen. That's how Helia ended up in a half-dead stasis under my sister's watch. Flora had insisted that after the Day of the Dead, nothing in Tal would be the same because the Goddess was rising and I would regret my betrayal.

Perhaps if I had not overheard how they did not plan for me to survive either way, her threats would have mattered more.

During the whole conversation, my stepsister stared silently. Whatever she knew, she would never talk. Not after I cursed her.

The theater stood at the edge of North's Place, the view almost identical to the one Lumi and I admired after the failed theft at the von Mekeln manor that started it all. Though for her, it started years ago.

Again, I unsuccessfully directed the magic to reach for her. When she revealed how many secrets she had kept from me and demanded I pick a side, there had been no time to talk. She wanted me to follow her into more death and mayhem. And I could not. It seemed by choosing to save Dimitri, my sister had decided I had placed myself against her.

I rested my hand on the closed bag. Lumi and her rebel friends needed to know the contents as much as the prince did. I might do at least that much good after getting involved in this mess, for even if the royals believed the incredible truth it carried, I doubted the king would share it with the wider population.

Ivan Gregorious III of Tal had sickened the day after I exchanged the letters. Had von Lemerch wanted only to ensure he did not learn the truth, or had I infected him? My hands shook despite the summer heat. Unless von Lemerch told me, I would never know that either, and I planned to never see her again.

In the dawn light, I memorized the picture drawn at the back of the paper—a delicate white star flower. Pretty. Seemingly innocent. Deceptive. Would Dimitri describe me the same?

I could not remember having ever seen its likeness, but flowers grew everywhere in Tal. If I found it, other answers would be close by. The picture was signed Lord Bersig, Councilor of Tal. He might write the king again after not receiving an answer. Hopefully, the king would be alive to receive the letter.

The song of the early morning, birds calling to each other, street sweepers whistling, bats settling, joined the melody inside me.

Lumi, where are you?

Again, the magic rose in answer to my wish. It sped through the bond between us, a fifth limb I had felt my whole life without realizing and found only emptiness on the other side. But she was out there, alive, somewhere. The knowledge stilled my panic.

The truths about our heritage were as much mine as hers. She had denied me part of myself, not trusted me to make my own decisions. Now, she denied me the opportunity to confront her. Once, I thought her not at home in the dark. How wrong I'd been.

I was not surprised she had refused to listen when I defended Dimitri, but I would never fall in line if that meant he would die. I was trapped between the two people who meant the most to me, and neither wanted to see me.

Dimitri had pushed me. Our conversations were like throwing myself off a building, never knowing where I would land. Living a lie, I had realized I always played a role. The meaning of freedom had changed, but not my longing.

I wanted to know who I could be. Where I belonged, just as I was.

I would find that place after I figured out a way to warn Dimitri and told the whole truth. Flora had echoed von Lemerch's threat—the crown prince would not survive his wedding night—and I had no idea if him marrying the real Helia instead of me would change anything.

His kisses burned in my mind. If I had said nothing, undressed, and shared my body instead, would I still be sitting here alone under the stars?

Was he thinking of me while breaking his fast with Helia? Or had I already been dismissed as a distraction, or worse, added to his list of revenge?

I had led him on, taken liberties without ever thinking I could hurt his feelings. That he could fall for someone like me had been too preposterous to consider.

I recognized it now. How I had avoided romantic entanglements for years only to throw myself at the one man I could never have. If he hated me, it was only right. He had thought me his bride when I had only been a thief in the night, stealing crowns and kisses. I had never tried to take his heart, but the whispered confessions showed he might have given me a part regardless.

My stomach rolled and temples throbbed with tears I could not let out. Never mine. Nothing was. *Yet.*

Vanya

After two more nights of searching through Tal, I'd found no flowers matching the drawing, no trace of my sister, and certainly no answers. Instead, each street held dissatisfied crowds shouting their displeasure and brandishing improvised weapons. Curfew was over, the fire burned out, fewer plague victims were carted off to the fire outside the city wall each day, but Tal was not the same place I left at the start of summer.

The pilgrims coming from all over the world to honor their ancestors in the City of the Dead eyed each other suspiciously, more people arrived daily from the steppe seeking work only to find none, and a bun cost as much as a whole loaf had a year ago. Below it all lay the common understanding that the king and nobility were to blame for the state of things. That change was needed, no matter the cost.

Despite the summer heat, many of the people I passed in the richer neighborhoods had cowls drawn up over their nose and glove-covered hands. The plague might no longer halt business, but it hovered in everyone's mind.

I saw Lumi's conviction mirrored in old and young. The red stick figure calling for blood was everywhere.

Walking from one drinking hall to the next between Lowtown and Rivertown, places neither Lumi nor I had visited, I grew more desperate in my questioning. At least I did not have to rely on descriptions, I just pointed to myself and asked if they had seen my short-haired twin.

Two blocks away from the Dragon Bridge stood the Drunken Dead, a drinking hall with neither music nor lorists telling tales. It was a place to drown your sorrows and gain a few more. The blood-red drawing stared down at the crowd from above the nicked bar, hopefully a sign that those less than satisfied with our rulers came here.

Despite the desperation and dissatisfaction hanging in the air, I smiled at the older man behind the bar.

"What'll it be?" he asked, turning to me.

I placed a copper on the counter, keeping my fingers on it, but before I could even ask for Lumi, surprise raced through him as his eyes locked on my face. He knew me. *He knew Lumi*.

"You've seen her? My sister?"

"Sister? You look just like the painting."

I blinked. "Painting?" I had only seen one picture carrying our likeness.

He snatched the coin from between my limp fingers. "Sorry love, he offered a lot more than copper and, well, I did owe his friend. He said he needs to return a lost shoe."

I turned as the barkeep whistled and waved his arms at a patron leaning against the back wall.

My calves contracted. My breath stuttered. Every instinct screamed to run—forward and away—as I met his cold blue eye, the other hidden under an eyepatch and the brim of a hat. The short coat emphasized his broad shoulders and the muscles I knew hid underneath. Dark stubble shadowed his sharp jaw. Watching him was a dangerous addiction, longing for more a sure way to irreparably break my already fractured heart.

Unmoving, I straightened my back, ready for a battle or beating. Whatever he had to say, rejection or recrimination, there was more at stake than my fragile emotions.

As our gazes locked, the music inside me quieted.

His presence was impossible. The crown prince did not come to a place like the Drunken Dead. Did not dress like a commoner and consume the piss they served in this hole.

The magic whispered of his burning anger and rock-hard resolution, sweet longing, and piercing shock.

My heartbeat sped up until I heard nothing else. He was as out of reach as the first night he caught me, and I thought him bat-bitten for believing me a princess. My fluttering heart did not care.

He blinked, seemed to absorb my presence, and his internal walls became impenetrable as he stalked toward me.

Though I'd never been one to swoon, the room spun. *He cannot be here. Cannot*—I needed time to plan what to say. To find the answers that would show him I was real. Show the danger he was in so I could walk away when he rejected me again.

I retreated without meaning to. He grabbed my arm before I could blink.

We stood like that, neither speaking nor moving, our chests heaving.

"This gonna be a problem?" the barkeep asked behind me. "I don't think your friend would want his favor traded for you hurting a girl. He was a stickler for that kind of thing. And it's bad for business."

Dimitri's enticing lips twisted into a sardonic smirk. "Don't worry on her behalf, she can throw me across the room. And he would very much have wanted for me to catch *this girl*. She owes us both."

There was only one person I had heard the prince refer to as a friend. I turned to the man behind the bar, reevaluating him, but still unable to understand how he fitted into this. "You knew Alexei?"

The man lowered his voice and could not have looked more suspicious if he tried. "Worked for him and the crossbones for years." He puffed up his chest. "I'm a royalist."

"And paid well for it," Dimitri said in a voice that shut down any argument, then turned to me, anger darkening his eyes and voice. "Come, *Vanya*, we have things to talk about even loyal ears shouldn't hear."

Dimitri steered me away while my name falling from his lips echoed inside me. How many times had I wished for him to whisper it? That I could give him that little piece of truth? Somehow, he had found it without me.

Instead of to a table, the prince steered me out the back door and into the putrid and already occupied alley.

"Who's this?" a hulking shape asked and despite not knowing Dimitri's intentions for dragging me here, I pressed against the prince's side. The part of me that wanted nothing more than for him to wrap me in his arms rejoiced in how they still automatically closed around me. It made me forget the last days. Made me want to hear him whisper my name over and over in his dark voice. Part of me was hope unwilling to die.

"I told you to leave. I'll do this on my own," Dimitri said, exasperated rather than frightened. "Her answers belong to me alone."

"My job's to keep you safe."

"Your job is to figure out where the food went after it entered Tal."

"You asked me to swear to you personally. My job's to keep you alive."

Irritation flared, and I wished I could see the prince's face. It seemed he had acquired a bodyguard. With the plots against him, I could only approve.

Dimitri pulled me past the stranger. "Then follow at a distance."

The alley was narrow enough that I brushed against what felt like a mountain of hard muscles and equally steady emotions.

On the wider street, lanterns hung above shops, eateries, and less savory establishments. Hard enough that I could not escape, Dimitri wrapped my arm around his, a mockery of how he had led me through palace halls. My two lives crashed together as his scent of leather and griffon brought back memories and a closeness I was sure he no longer felt. Lumi might have lied to me, but when she said she would bring Helia to the palace, I had read the truth in her hard eyes and had no doubt she'd followed through.

Still... He was here.

He knew my name.

And he had never been, could never be mine.

Dimitri stuffed his eyepatch into a coat pocket, as if he needed to see me fully, while his mental walls blocked every trace of what he felt. I studied his profile, seeing only the practiced lack of emotions he displayed in court. The cold face that made nobles scurry out of his way.

"It's time to talk. Why did you invade my life, Tempest?"

I would have much preferred it to be time for kisses, but at least he was not shouting or arresting me. "Tempest?"

"I had to call you something when I didn't know your name. Who sent you to the palace? Talk."

"I'm—" At the thought of mentioning the curse, invisible fingers closed around my throat. I placed my hand on the bag tied to my thigh, the letter inside heavier than a boulder. "I'm trying to help you and Tal. Dimi—"

"Why would I believe a word you say if you still protect whoever hired you?"

My hand fell away. "Then I'll show you."

"Now," he whispered as if stopping himself from shouting. "Don't think to disappear again."

I needed to earn back his trust, both so I could reveal the letter's contents and because I could not bear adding to the sea of grief I knew he carried. Surely, he could not believe it all a lie.

"I'm at your service," I said, trying to annoy him enough to break through the hard surface.

"You're not mine at all. You never were," he answered without a flicker of emotion. "I know your name, nothing more."

Last time we touched, I shared not my body but my Spirit. He had seen all of me. If anyone knew who I was, it was him.

"You know me better than the foreign princess you were determined to marry to please your father."

His body tensed. "And I thought she wanted so little to do with me that she tried to steal her own crown. Instead, her aunt

hired a Lowtown look-alike, and I could not even tell the difference. Were they planning to reveal the ploy after the wedding and make me a laughingstock?" He glared down at me. "You were clearly sent to seduce me. I might have wanted you, Tempest, but I'm not letting my guard down again. You hold answers I need, nothing more."

I swallowed past my longing to prove him wrong by reaching out, placing my hand on his cheek, and trying to kiss the hurt away. If anything more was to happen between us, he would have to make the first move. I was not trading affection for trust—if such a thing was even possible.

"You might not believe me, but I stayed in Tal to help."

He raised an eyebrow. "With the missing food and hunting robbers?"

I nodded despite being caught off guard by his words. I was at least hunting one very specific rebel—hopefully he was not hunting the same.

My sister wanted him dead. Had told me to do it. I thought only of that, remembering the look in Lumi's eyes, the drive for revenge in her heart. *That's what I'm talking about*, I told the magic. *I'm not telling secrets.*

"There's someone who wants to kill you."

"I'm sure many want me dead." He leaned down until his breath mingled with mine. "I even suspected you might, but you had too many chances. Watching me sleep, breaking into my chambers, finding me even in the furthest courtyard…"

"I'm serious."

"So am I, Tempest. If you're trying to warn me of a threat, tell me plainly."

The choking magic returned with force until I could only shake my head. *Lumi, I'm only talking about Lumi*. But no matter how many times I repeated the words, part of me tried to figure out a way to tell him everything.

"Tempest?" Dimitri said as if he was repeating himself. "Does it have anything to do with the Spirit of Lowtown?"

The words snapped me back and the magic let me go. "Spirit?"

He pointed at the human-sized drawing in what looked like blood on a wall we passed.

"You say you want to help. It's everywhere we search. Riders return from abandoned but seemingly untouched farms, finding it in the barns. It's known as the Spirit of Lowtown, but I don't see what it has to do with anything outside the city. Alexei told me it symbolizes rebellion and the Goddess, death and anger."

I no longer knew when I had spotted the first one. A bloody stick figure demanding the matching blood of our rulers. A foreigner would not know it, but I no longer had to pretend ignorance. This was not von Lemerch's secret. As night settled and the first Spirits appeared above the streets, I talked.

"They're death calling for death. The Goddess's wrath on Tal. Or so people say. I think they first appeared here three or perhaps four years ago and then spread to the rest of the city. That's how they got their name."

He raised an eyebrow, as if asking me to continue. If this was how I regained some of his trust, I was happy to talk.

"All know death walks the streets of Tal. Only the palace remains untouched." I swallowed, then pressed on. This was common bar talk, no secrets or conspiracies, but telling the Crown Prince of Tal, no matter how well I knew him, gave the words weight. "The plague came, and the dead were burned, forbidden the honor of the Bone Grove. Some whisper that when the Goddess walks with the lost, that soon blood will flow and the palace walls crack, because there is no stopping death. That's what it means, but it's just talk. A prayer to the Goddess from the poor desiring change." *Or those like my sister, willing to fight for it.*

I could not say von Lemerch had collaborated with priestesses wearing the bloody stick figure, could only hope his questions would lead him to her.

He steered me down another street and though this was my Tal, I barely registered where we were going.

The ground was muddy and lanterns far between when he pushed me into a burned-out house and against the blackened remnants of a wall.

Near absolute darkness enveloped us. The sounds of people arguing and laughing in the surrounding buildings became distant parts of Lowtown's song.

Caged in his strong arms, his burning intensity, so different from the distant prince, kept me locked in place.

He leaned closer, his breath tricking my body into believing things were different between us. Wanting me to finish what we started in the princess's chambers.

His lips brushed my temple.

"Why are you still here Tempest?"

"To help." Perhaps not in the way he thought, but if I could regain his trust enough to show him the letter by working together, that was what I would do—surely running into each other in a city of a million showed the Wishmaker's approval. Perhaps if we found the missing food, even Lumi would have to see he was not all bad. "I'm here because I care and want to make amends."

He seemed to barely hear my words, gears moving behind his equally dark eyes.

"I should have known." Slowly, he slid his hand down my arm. My skin tingled under the cloth, and my breath caught. I did not dare to move as he caressed my wrist, pulling the coat and shirt sleeve up. Despite the darkness, he followed the stark

lines. The noble's sigil was a lie I could never erase. "If they would fake this, how far would they go?" he mumbled.

Despite the intimate touch, the closeness I had longed for remained far away. He was not thinking of me at all, but trying to guess who was behind my appearance in his life.

I wanted to tell him about von Lemerch. That I had seen Eki with her in the crypt. The letter and the truth about the plague.

A tiny mage light appeared above us, too small to be recognizable from the street despite the missing front door.

"You can start by telling me what happened here, Tempest. He was too good a man for his bones to be thrown into the Taliell. I have had people search all streets, but no one would tell me who took them."

And then I realized where he had taken me.

The light revealed charred beams barely carrying the ceiling and a narrow staircase leading to the upper floors. Stones irregularly worn by countless feet lay beneath us. In the back stood the remnants of the communal oven and chimney, the only thing warming the house in winter. It could have been any Lowtown tenement, but the beam leaning just so was imprinted on my mind. This was where Dimitri stopped the flames and almost died.

It was where Alexei had died on the front steps, keeping his friend safe.

After my show of magic, it might never be inhabited again. We were superstitious folk.

"Well?"

The mage light vanished. Perhaps he did not wish for me to see the sorrow in his eyes, though the pain that had laced his voice was unmistakable.

I swallowed, longing to move an inch forward and lean against Dimitri's chest to reassure myself he was not lying lifeless on the floor two feet away. But he was right. This as well was not von Lemerch's secret. She had nothing to do with what happened. As I prepared my words, no choking hands closed around my throat in warning. I was only protecting myself.

"I found him outside the door facing a mob," I whispered, skipping my sister and the magic, praying to the Goddess my words would give him peace instead of more pain. "They were throwing stones, and he was already hurt." The stake in his chest and blood staining the uniform flashed before my eyes. "I convinced them he was just a guard trying to help. Made them leave."

"How?"

I shook my head, knowing he would feel the motion. "I don't know. They never listened to me before. Popova spoke up for me—she holds power in Lowtown, magic of some kind, and lives just down the street." And would hate being spoken about to the crown prince. He had no idea how much I was giving him, how many of the taboos of thieves and the disenfranchised I was breaking by talking.

"But they didn't hurt him?"

The scene replayed before my eyes. "A stone brought him to his knees. I've no idea how he stood so long… we might have all lived. Then someone else came. Stabbed him. It was so quick. I… I'm sorry."

Meaningless words. I should have done something more. Been faster. Cleverer.

"Don't hold back now, *Vanya*."

My name was a curse rather than the caress I longed for. How did I explain Kirill? He had been my stepfather and jailer, cruel and calculating. Had dealings with von Lemerch I could not speak of.

"Let me show you like I did my life." I could only regain his trust by giving mine in return. The time for deceptions was over.

I reached to lay my hand on his chest, and he flinched. I froze. When he thought me a bride he did not want, someone who torched the palace and stole her own crown, he had desired me—I had felt it even as he walked away.

My eyes burned.

Was there a melody for heartbreak? A fragile note? Or an off-key pitch, ripping through the body?

My hand hung in the air between us.

"I need touch to share the memories." My tight throat made the words hard.

We had been trapped in a push and pull from the start, afforded too few moments of peace. How could I have dreamt we had a future? But the hope in my chest was a starved thing, willing to cling to any sign.

Seeming to brace himself, his calloused fingers closed around my wrist, then slid down until they interlaced with mine.

As his mental walls crumbled, I held back from the emotions churning under the surface. If I felt his distrust and disgust, I would not be able to do what I had offered. I owed him this. Owed Alexei, whose final request had been for me to protect his friend.

Show him, I asked the magic and held nothing back.

His hand crushed mine. His chest heaved, and I knew silent tears stained his cheeks as they did mine.

It was easier to control this time, perhaps because the memory was fresher or simpler than my whole life. I knew when Kirill came. When the knife slid through Alexei's throat. When I launched myself at my stepfather.

Dimitri released my hand, breaking the connection, when I entered the house for him. Perhaps he could not bear to watch me save him and the moment we had shared on the ground outside—or perhaps seeing yourself through someone else's eyes was too strange.

"He recognized you. He forgave you." A lantern outside reflected in the prince's too-wide eyes as a whistle pierced the night. Dimitri did not seem to hear it. "Zakhar was indebted to Kirill. This was repayment. The cost of my revenge I would never have accepted. And they're both dead. What happened to the bodies?"

"I don't know… Perhaps someone brought them to the temples." Though probably, they had been stripped of all valuables and dumped in the river. Nothing remained on Lowtown's streets for long.

Dimitri leaned closer, the air between us vibrating. "What is this magic you have? How can I trust it?"

I hesitated. The magic was not something von Lemerch had forbidden me from sharing, because she had no idea I had it. Would he react with fear? Mariska had told me my kind of mages were also known as mind witches—the villains of any tale they featured in.

Truth, I reminded myself. *And kindness, when I can afford it*. Tomorrow would not change without me doing the same. I would jump off this cliff and hope he caught me.

"I can read emotions—and apparently share memories."

"Another thing I should have noticed. Helia von Heskin is a matter manipulator." It was not a question.

Someone whistled again. Dimitri sighed and stepped through the broken doorway. Before he could leave, a man built like a mountain pushed him back inside.

"The Spirits on the street—they're not behaving like they should," the bodyguard from the alley said, backing us further into the house.

"There's been more since the fire… All the dead…" My voice broke. Alexei's and Kirill's bodies were far from alone in the Taliell that night.

"Let's just walk past them," Dimitri said, his voice controlled again. "Yahontov, you've been out of Tal too long."

"I've walked the streets more than you. I tell you, they're not normal."

The familiar white light shone through the doorway, painting the world in shades of gray.

I slipped under Yahontov's herding arms and peeked outside.

The street was bright despite the dark clouds hanging heavily above. There were more shapes than I could count, certainly more than the one or two you found drifting through most Lowtown streets at night. Still, I thought Dimitri right until the magic slipped my control.

Dark human shapes walked among the Spirits, seemingly untouched, but when the magic brushed against them, cold like stepping into an ice cellar wrapped around me. Cold like von Lemerch.

"They're dead. Goddess, save us. They're all dead," I breathed, unable to move away.

The rumors were true. The dead were walking—and their Spirits were still inside their decaying bodies.

One broke open a door down the street. Spirits flowed inside, followed by screams cut off too soon.

It could be von Lemerch or Lumi—both their magic felt like cold death—one who had good cause to kill me, the other to kill the prince. Or this was something completely separate from us. But *why* did not matter when animated corpses strode down your streets.

I had decided to stop running. To fight. But how did one fight death itself?

I turned, grabbed Dimitri's hand again, and dragged him out the back door. For once, he did not argue.

Yahontov followed close behind as I guided us through Lowtown's warren of alleys and connected backyards. If I saw a Spirit, I picked another way. And another again.

I knew each street despite the night and many destroyed buildings.

Each time a Spirit appeared, my terror spiked, but it was quickly followed by anger. This was my neighborhood. And the Spirits were part of Tal. We respected them, as the dead deserved, and no one should make us fear our ancestors. Fear the very essence of our city.

My body screamed for air, my legs begged me to pause, and though I slowed, I only stopped when we reached the outskirts of the night market in Midtown and chattering crowds pushed in from both sides.

Dimitri leaned on his knees, catching his breath, hat long lost, while Yahontov seemed like he could have continued all the way up the hill to the palace. Behind its sigils, they would most likely be safe from this new threat, even if the rest of us were not.

"What was that?" Dimitri asked between gulps of air. "Was that your power?"

My body shook, only stubbornness keeping me on my feet. I turned to face him, forgetting I was supposed to make peace.

"They broke into homes. You think I would hurt my own people? Because of course I predicted I would find you in a drinking hall, be dragged back to Lowtown, and need a distraction to what? Go shopping?" I swept my hands around us, taking the anger that had been building out on him. "I've showed you everything I can. Arrest me or let me go."

He straightened. "You've lied to me at every point. If I thought locking you up would make you talk, I would. You say you want to help? Then show me I can trust you. Meet me at the same drinking hall again tomorrow at sunset, ready to tell me everything."

"I can't." But I wished I could spill all von Lemerch's secrets. Tell him why I had stolen the crown. That the Day of the Dead

would bring death.

He sighed, shaking his head. “You owe me answers but so far, I’m only getting more questions. You said you wanted to leave Tal, still here you are. If you want to work together, come tomorrow. Otherwise, disappear again. This time for good.”

He left without waiting for my response, Yahontov trailing silently behind.

We all wanted answers, and I feared we would all have to pay for them. Could I, barely able to look after myself, really make tomorrow better for anyone else?

Could I show him von Lemerch like I had the rest? My throat closed, knowing I contemplated revealing her words. Would pushing through kill me? How fast could I be? Would he even believe me?

Death was everywhere in Tal, but I did not long to embrace it.

No more rash decisions. No more of the *usual idiocy* that made even my twin distrust my judgment.

Be it unfinished business or secrets, something tied me to Dimitri, and come tomorrow, I would need to find a truth I could share, for I cared too much to run. I straightened and joined the crowd drifting from stall to stall. I had new questions to ask before dawn. Somewhere, someone knew more than the rumors on everyone’s lips.

The hairs on my neck rose, thief’s instincts and magic telling me someone was watching.

“Lumi,” I whispered into the busy night. “If you’re behind the walking dead, it needs to stop.”

If we could all work together, maybe we knew enough to put the pieces together.

But searching for my sister was no longer enough. I had avoided confronting her lies despite them offering truths about my own life. Seeing the prince and corpses walking reminded me of the innocent lives at stake.

I could no longer put off meeting my great-grandmother—Morovara, the first priestess of bones, High Priestess of Tal, and the third person I knew who might possess the power to raise the dead.

Vanya

In the Temple District, young priestesses in white robes were out brushing the steps and weeding the paths even before midday. Like the dead, the temple did not sleep.

Before I went to the palace and pretended to be a princess, I would have hidden among the trees, then after dark snuck into the largest ziggurat, or run back home to build up my courage. Now, I walked up the front steps as if I owned them. I was speaking to Morovara, whether she wanted to or not. My magic buzzed under my skin, reenforcing my resolve.

No one stopped me, though some looked like they wanted to. Inside, the shadows swallowed the morning sun. This early, it barely reached the light shafts piercing the stone walls to bounce on the polished copper plates. Candles as thick as my thigh stood unlit in the sconces.

I strode in and up until my calves screamed and legs wobbled.

The high priestess would be at the highest floor.

The central stairs finally ended in an airy room covering the top of the pyramid. There was no door and it gaped open to the sky on all sides. It must have been freezing in winter, windy in fall, and miserably muggy in spring, but now it calmed my sweaty skin.

An old woman in white robes with bones and roses embroidered in gold along the hem sat behind a metal desk. She petted a large ginger cat and watched the puffy, white clouds drift by. When I moved closer, Morovara, High Priestess of Bones, turned to face me.

I had barely been able to make out her features when seeing her across a crowd. This close, there was only one word to describe her—invariable. There had been no other high priestess in my lifetime. She had always been, and seeing her wrinkled face, as if a larger person had shrunk to the size of a child, I could believe she had been here since the final divine ruler stepped down.

"Luminata?" she asked, her voice strong despite her age, then shook her head. "No, the sister. I expected to see you sooner." She pointed to the chair opposite her and there was nothing weak in her movements. "Sit."

"She came to you?"

The Book of Bloodlines had shown it and Lumi confirmed it, but my sister had also lied and withheld. The confirmation that the second most powerful woman in Tal knew us stole the air from my lungs. No one called Lumi Luminata besides our mother. I leaned against the wall, my knees no longer carrying my weight.

Morovara nodded. "We are family."

The world spun.

The sun rose behind the high priestess, my great-grandmother, and she seemed more divine than living. I was imagining things. Maybe dreaming. That seemed more probable than that the High Priestess of Tal being related to us.

"You expected me?"

"I see she didn't tell you." The old woman approached and patted my hand, bringing me back to the realness of the moment. My magic sang of her care and exasperation. Her bone-deep weariness. "Sit before you fall. Have some tea."

She led me to her table and filled two stone cups from the still steaming pot.

"How?" I asked, unable to formulate more words. I had come confident, with an agenda and demands, but this close, the high priestess's face held an echo of my mother's eyes and delicate cheekbones, and my focus slipped.

We did not know each other; I should feel nothing for a woman who had not been there. But this was *family*.

Morovara sipped her tea and offered the cat a crumb from her plate before placing her hand on mine. "Your mother was my grandchild, her mother—my only daughter—married a foreign noble and broke all contact. She raised your mother to despise me, and I let it be because they seemed happy, and he had enough money to take care of them. When he died your grandmother

followed closely behind. Your mother was eighteen. She refused to talk to me and already had a man paying her living expenses. I tried again over the years, but it was always the same answer. When I learned that she had died as well and plague curfew lifted, you two were already gone—to that damned moneylender, Lumi told me when she came to me two years ago."

"Two years?" And lying each day.

"I offered her a place in the temple. I have few worldly possessions—everything you see belongs to the order—but she refused and declared you would make it on your own—free and unbeholden to anyone. She only wanted one thing from me, that I teach her how to use her powers, to be a death keeper. A necromancer. We're holy to the Goddess. Many priestesses hold some power, but none besides me as great as your sister's. I had hoped my daughter would inherit the gift, but if she did, she hid it well."

Death keeper and heart turner. Bones and roses—oh, how we fitted Tal.

A deep anger burned inside me, fed by the betrayals. We might have gone here instead of risking our lives stealing. Kirill could never have reached us if we entered the Temple even if he knew where we were. Lumi should have given me the choice.

I gripped the high priestess's still-strong hand. "Can you teach me as well?"

Morovara shook her head. "You are something else, sweet girl. Made for the living. Your sister and I were made to calm the dead."

"Is she here?"

"I haven't seen her since last summer. I ask the Goddess to turn away from you each night for I fear the anger Lumi carry. When you're hurt, sometimes you turn the pain outward to cut others. It never ends well."

I grunted. Seemed she'd shared more with our great-grandmother than me.

A year of teaching in secret and my sister had been able to control the Spirits. How long without even a teacher would I need until I understood my magic? Would it drive me insane before then? A fear deeper than any other sent a shiver through me. If I hurt others…

"Is there a way to stop the magic?"

"Stop it?"

"Take it away. Block it again."

"Why would you ever want such a thing?" My great-grandmother's searching eyes burrowed under my skin, as if she was the mind witch probing for answers.

"I cannot control it… Mage's sickness seems unavoidable, and people despise my kind."

Morovara shook her head again. "We used to be called 'world talkers' because when you open yourself up a part of the world itself listens and responds. If you try to bend it to your will, it'll only hurt you and those around you. Don't force it. Ask and listen."

"But I'm a heart turner—the stories describe witches who control minds and emotions, twisting people's Spirits while they are still inside their bodies."

"A misnomer." She chuckled. "You're no story, sweet girl. Some might think you turn the hearts of men, and you can." She smiled, and I heard the double meaning in her words before she sobered. "You don't need to change others, that way lies madness, and you can only amplify or smother what's already there anyway. With powers such as ours, taking time for quiet is essential. Focus on that. The noble mages don't understand. They suppress their magic all their lives, then attempt to push through their limits in a great show of power. Everything needs balance—like you and your sister—life and death."

The song of the temple was quieter than the city—rushing of robes, chants, and sleeping bats. Cats slinking through stone corridors on silent paws hummed in the back of my mind.

"I can feel the calm here."

Morovara shook her head. "You're still using magic. There are more dead under Tal, generation upon generation, than anyone knows. With my help, the priestesses sing them into the ground, calm them to sleep and guide them through the Grove. Even up here, even during daylight, I can feel their discontent, and it grows every day. If I could not close off my mind, I would never rest."

"What do you do?"

"Separate myself. For me visualization works. I imagine a blanket, the kind my mother knitted, wrapped around me. It might be old, but it can still take away the cold of the dead." She lifted a threadbare black cloth from the back of her chair and stroked the fluffy fabric. "Everyone has their own method. Your sister imagined herself in the Archive, surrounded by knowledge."

I pictured the prince's mental walls, and brick by brick built my own. They were not smooth obsidian but worn and climbable. Yellow like the hidden courtyard. When needed, I could remove a stone to let something in or ascend the top and leap into the sea of others' emotions.

While building inside me, I had no idea if it would work, but as I settled the last mental brick, there was, perhaps for the first time, silence.

I'd believed before I touched the crown, I only felt Lumi's intentions, but that was not true. Always, the melody of life had

been there, playing through me, pulling me forward in a dance all my own.

This was like plunging my head under the water in the bath, only more. Like I levitated in an infinite ocean, knowing there was life all around, but my ears were unable to convert the swells into sound. My great-grandmother nodded to me as she petted the cat. Was this how others experienced the world?

The magic had seemed something separate from me, a power to use or not. But that was not what it meant to be a mage.

This was.

The magic was me, and I was it. And without it, I hardly recognized the world around me. Drawing on it too deeply, like I had in Lowtown or when I fell, made me more part of the silent song playing all around. Like someone whose hearing increased until they could not filter out the crickets and each feline purr became thunderous.

What kind of mage had the man who climbed onto the table during my welcome banquet been? He talked of the king hiding and the dead rising. Peasants clamoring to get inside. It sounded too much like what von Lemerch had spoken of in the crypt later. What happened when a water seer lost himself to his power?

The hairs on my arms stood, a chill so deep even the Talian summer heat could not reach it formed inside me. Time was running out.

I imagined prying a brick away from my wall, destroying the unnatural silence inside without allowing the world's song to overwhelm me, and faced Morovara. Finding family had distracted me. It was time for harder questions.

I pulled my hand away. No matter how kindly she had welcomed me, she was a stranger who had not reached out to help when I needed it. And now the dead were walking the city, and her priestesses were secretly meeting with von Lemerch under the Women's Tower, talking of death and rebellion.

I could not mention von Lemerch, but I was finding there were ways to work around that. Focusing on what I had seen, what I knew instead of what I might guess, I started on the questions I had formulated during the long night.

"As the high priestess, you control the Spirits in Tal?"

Morovara sipped her tea. "There is no controlling the dead, especially the older ones. I guide and calm."

I frowned before I could hide it. "So, you cannot make them do anything?"

"Perhaps for a bell. Perhaps if they're newly dead. Why do you ask?"

The grandmotherly smile had dropped, and I saw the unbending woman underneath. Despite loosening the hold on my magic, I felt nothing from her now. She was better shielded than even the prince. Where he was a black wall, she seemed simply to not be there.

I could have told her how the Spirits obeyed Lumi. Or perhaps found a way to mention the priestesses being where they should not be. But after last night, those were not the most urgent things happening.

"The dead—still inside their bodies—are attacking families in Lowtown."

Morovara blinked. "Are you sure they're deceased?"

"You identified my magic without asking me. I know life and death."

Her face did not change but a slight tremor shook the tea in her hand as she stirred it three times in a silent appeal to the Goddess she served.

"Then it has come to this again. After all these years…"

"Are you behind it?" *Was this all an act?* "The Spirits are your domain."

She sighed. "Disrupting the Spirits is forbidden. A desecration. Why do you think the skin and flesh is removed as soon as possible? When only the bones remain no Spirit, no matter how powerful can force its way back inside. Or be forced."

"My sister—"

"Would not be strong enough. Perhaps if she trained for the next two decades. No. This is older than all of us."

"Who?" I asked, despite already knowing the answer. *Von Lemerch.*

"I tell you this only because you're family. There are two temples—have been since Herebov took Ealhswip as his bride. You and I descend from the daughter she had before they met—Eydis. She became the head of the Temple after her mother died and Herebov claimed Tal. Eydis accepted his rule, perhaps in honor of her mother, perhaps because Herebov's soldiers rode through the streets, and most of the priestesses followed her.

"But a small group did not accept anyone besides the Goddess above them and split off, determined to reclaim what had been stolen. Eydis's journals describe the dead walking the streets, attacking soldiers and civilians alike. Together with Herebov's children by his second wife, Yelena, and the Sigil Guild, Eydis finally stopped the dead."

"If they won, why is it happening again?"

Morovara's eyes flashed in anger. "They won a battle, not the war, and only broke the balance further. The Spirits still feel the Gate to the other side and come to Tal, but they never move on. The royals refuse to even acknowledge the problem as their magic enforce the status quo. A city filled with Spirits draw more pilgrims—more commerce and money. Why care about the peace of those already dead?"

I remembered Dimitri's dismissing tone when talking about the poor and those streaming into the city. If he thought the living should look after themselves, what did he think of the dead? I'd seen flashes of change and care, but had he saved Tal from the

fire because he cared about the people or because this was the city he had been raised to rule?

"And those who did not follow Eydis?"

"The Temple has tried to eradicate the refusers for generations, but a secret sect is difficult to find and in times of hardship their membership grows, especially when they claim the last divine ruler leads them. Lately, their bloody symbol has been everywhere."

The cold I'd felt earlier settled deeper in my bones. There was only one symbol she could be talking about. Dimitri asked me about it only last night when he found me under its red eyes. It seemed the Spirit of Lowtown was not its real name, and the rebellion it called for was one much older than my sister's.

"And Ealhswip?" I asked hungrily. Finally, things were fitting together. Had Lumi known all this?

"They say she still walks, but there has been no proof for two centuries, only attempts against the royals. If we could restore the balance…"

The blue burning eyes. How she commanded the priestesses in the crypt. Lumi claimed von Lemerch could not die. If she was not Ealhswip, she was something eerily similar.

This was what Dimitri needed to know, but how could I tell him? Just the realization that these were von Lemerch's secrets after all, squeezed my throat.

I forced my next words out, focusing on how this was the Temple's truth, how the connection was only my conjecture. "Can she be killed?"

"An animated body will rot without consuming more Spirits." Morovara lowered her voice. "But if the divine ruler still exists, I'm not sure anything besides the Goddess herself can bring her home."

"What does she want?"

"Revenge, child. Like any wronged woman, she wants revenge and to ensure no one can ever betray her ever again."

The cold reached my racing heart. *How did we fight death itself?*

I had believed if I could only tell Dimitri the truth, if he could convince the king to act, then surely, they could handle von Lemerch. Lock her in prison and throw away the key. Hang her and all this would be over.

I had thought von Lemerch familiar from the start. Had assumed I had seen her in Kirill's office or on the street. Had been unable to connect her to the stone face of the woman embraced by Herebov before the palace and the beautifully chiseled face of the prince's game pieces. They overlapped in my mind. The aged features smoothing until I knew it was the same slim nose and lips. The same slightly tilted eyes.

The knowledge settled around me like a manacle.

Her curse seemed a living thing wrapping around my throat. I did not need to test it to know, I would not be able to repeat any of what I had just learned. I should have stopped my questions earlier. Left before I knew.

What would I tell Dimitri when he asked?

Again, I was falling, damn it, and this time I did not see the ground. My world was one of chamber pots, tending hearths, gathering debts, and stealing to keep us afloat. Dreams and dancing. I loved to listen to the lorists tell of mages and faraway cities. But undead queens and the lies our very city was built on were not for the likes of me to unravel.

Run, part of me said. *You can leave it all behind.*

What does it matter if Lumi and Dimitri make this battle their own? But Tal was mine as well. It belonged to the average people only wanting to make ends meet more than the heroes and rebels. It belonged to those who danced and laughed, not only those who sought to right old wrongs through blood.

No.

I could no more walk away now than when I learned Dimitri lay injured in Lowtown. People were still dying, and more would follow if I understood von Lemerch's words—she wanted the streets flooded with the recently dead. Morovara had confirmed Spirits could be controlled—*but what could I do?*

I gathered the pieces of myself while watching the ginger cat play with a dust mote, unable to catch it but distracted from the food on the table. I was no more than a speck flying in the wind but perhaps that could pull an undead ruler from her plans. Distract her until others could figure out a way to stop her.

Hope never left me alone. It beat through my blood and warmed my extremities. It gave me a direction.

I met Morovara's shrewd eyes. My magic could not read her. Still, I chose to trust my great-grandmother. It might make me a fool, but I was done acting alone.

I squeezed her fragile hand again, finally sensing the deep calm underneath. Morovara knew her place in the world, had never questioned it. While the things she told me shook me, she'd lived with them for decades.

"If I found a way, would you help me stop it?"

"The cult of Ealhswip?"

"The dead. The priestesses. All of it. If I found the answers, would you help?"

She placed her other hand over mine. "However I can."

I nodded and knew seeking Morovara had been only the first step. Before I met the prince tonight, I needed to take another.

My position was not one of strength, I was the one in between the royals and the rebels, Temple and von Lemerch. No one else connected them all—perhaps that could be my path. A bridge for others. The magic hummed in approval. I was not turning hearts but connecting them, and it would require both kindness and leaps of faith.

My eyes locked on the cat chasing the dust in the air. It leaped onto the ledge, balancing above the drop. As I well knew, one shove, and anyone could fall. To pull someone off their path, you needed to understand what they wanted. And, like a proper thief, take it from them.

A smile spread across my lips. "Where does Councilwoman von Lemerch live?"

* * *

Three bells later, back cramped and mouth parched from lying unmoving on a tree branch while spying on von Lemerch manor on 9th Street in North's Place through the foliage, little of my previous enthusiasm remained.

I'd thought if I identified and followed her associates, I would find the thread that unwound this whole web. There must be documents, evidence, or at least clues I could bring Dimitri. Something that would lead him to send the Guard here without the curse silencing me.

But there had been no guests. The drawn curtains had not moved. And von Lemerch's coach, the black one which had delivered Lana and me to the palace a month ago, stood clearly visible before the stable. Had it been absent, perhaps desperation and boredom would have made me brave enough to break inside. With her home, even I would not take the risk.

When the sun sunk, I knew I could delay no longer. Dimitri was expecting me. If I did not show, he would think I ran away after all.

As I climbed down, the manor door swung open and a figure I remembered too well despite only meeting her twice appeared.

Dimitri

Flying this high, Cherny's wings rode the gusts, sailing more than beating. The riders flanking me lay flat in their harnesses, reducing wind resistance and benefiting from their great creatures' body heat. When the scouts returned this morning after finding another abandoned farmstead, I had not been able to resist escaping the court and reports for the afternoon. If Tal was death, this was life.

There were no places to hide on the grassland below. After finding a single woman in all of Tal, surely I could find the robbers and missing food out here.

But with Tempest, I'd had somewhere to start. The off-duty guard I'd paid to watch her stepsister's house had reported spotting her. They lost her again when she left in the direction of Rivertown. From there, it had been easy to learn she visited drink halls, asking for information, though people had been cagey about what.

It had taken two more days of searching before our paths crossed.

I had not truly believed it until she turned around—same emerald eyes, wild hair, and elegant steps—in Lowtown coat and pants that clung to her curves like a second skin.

I'd burned to touch and reassure myself she'd not been a figment of my imagination, but she had been someone else's tool. Someone forced her into my life for unknown reasons.

Getting answers from her was supposed to bring me peace. Instead, the pain of my friend's death tore me apart when she shared her memories. It was as if I had been there myself. The rain-slick street, Alexei already on his knees, the older man speaking to Vanya like he knew her. Then the knife.

She had known nothing of the murder the moneylender talked about, but I did. Alexei had died for my revenge. I killed Zakhar and left his partner able to identify us, thinking it would have no consequences. All because I could not wait until I wore the crown.

I had valued the dead over the living and my best friend had paid the price.

Hoping to escape the guilt, I urged Cherny to race across the sky.

Alexei had hated flying. In all the years we'd known each other, only once did he ride with me. We snuck out of the Tower, only ten years old, and rashly stole a griffon from the stables. Only through the Wishmaker's boon did we pick one of the few that allowed strangers close. In the sky, Alexei had clung to me in terror while I laughed with the wind, the magic barely under my command. On land, he had always been the wild one.

Cherny's familiar warmth anchored me as I blinked away tears behind the flying goggles. The last time we spoke, Alexei begged me to set aside revenge and do something for my city. I was not the leader he imagined, but for once, my father had ordered me to do something worthwhile. I would find out who was behind the missing food. Whatever happened on the Day of the Dead, the people would have their celebration. If I could not honor my friend's bones and Spirit, I would honor his wishes.

Once, my ancestors ruled the steppes, flying above or riding across, never settling for long, until one day the greatest war chief, Herebov, fell in love with Ealhswip, the last divine ruler of Tal, and founded the monarchy. Watching the unbroken horizon, I wished my ancestors had never left their nomadic life. Soaring through the frigid clouds brought calm to my anger and hurt, confusion and longing for a future I had for a moment thought possible.

We flew over the grasslands, searching for the farmsteads considered too inconsequential to be marked on maps, free to sell their wares to all while owing allegiance to none. It meant no one protected them when the bandits came, but that did not change that Tal was dependent on them to feed its ever-growing populace.

The further we ventured from the mountains, the drier it got. We followed the thinning arms of the Taliell but only spotted wild animals until I saw our goal after two bells of flying—a cluster of three large dwellings surrounded by animal enclosures.

With a square blue flag, I signaled to land away from the cattle that dotted the grass like woolen clouds. Griffons could go up

to a three-day without food but would hunt if allowed. No point in alienating the proud locals by killing their livestock—if any remained.

Yahontov touched down next to me on his brown-speckled griffon, the three other riders following. Despite his size, he had used all his savings as a third-born son to purchase the mount. I understood the wish to fly no matter what others told you was suitable, only too well.

Yahontov had been stationed at the same keep I'd been exiled to, and though we had not interacted beyond sparring and patrols, I had remembered his quiet, steady approach when selecting a personal guard. So far, he had not disappointed, despite my suspicion that he might be on the Roja's payroll. I had demanded he swear his loyalty to me and only me—that did not mean I would have brought him last night if I'd had a choice. Tal was a melting pot about to tip. Even without being recognized, many would have attacked me for my coin. Returning to the palace, I'd made sure he knew if he reported Tempest, the undead would be the least of his problems.

It was true she had betrayed me. That I could not look at her, nor look away. And equally impossible to deny that if anyone touched a hair on her head, I would skin them alive.

I shook my head to focus on the present, and released the hook that connected me to the harness while flying. To see above the swaying grass, I rose and balanced on top of my saddle. Besides the grazing animals, nothing moved.

Yahontov nodded toward the farmstead.

"Seems peaceful."

"Too peaceful," I muttered. "There's no one there."

He sniffed the air. "Nothing burned."

I opened myself to the wind. Out here, there was little to impede it and despite being careful since overexerting myself in Lowtown, its whispers blew through me.

Those who streamed into Tal said bandits had burned their farms and fields. But tales twisted as they moved from mouth to mouth, and none could be found for more questions. Perhaps people had exaggerated abandoning their farms due to drought or other causes. But…

"Don't trust anything," I said. "The scouts should be waiting."

Yahontov leapt into the tall grass and only the white-painted leather cap showed his progress. None of us wore anything stronger than bones and leather—the weight would wear out the griffons. My buckled armor fit like a second skin, I could close each strap in my sleep, and still I felt exposed. In a battle down here, bandits on horses or Vsadnik with bows would have the advantage.

Could Tempest shoot an arrow as well as she threw me across the room?

Probably not based on what she had shown me, but due to my anger and betrayal, I found myself second-guessing every assumption. She had been a contradiction as a princess—elegant and alluring, strong and wild. Beautiful without effort. Powerful and fragile. Her cheeks smoother than any silk, her hands rough with callouses. At least those made sense for someone raised in Lowtown. But the rest? How did someone so poor gain the bearing of a princess?

Despite the joy of riding Cherny again and the need to see what the scouts discovered, I longed for tonight. When I was with her, I never knew what would come next.

The grass divided and Yahontov returned followed by a shorter woman in white bone helmet. I had Cherny moving toward the buildings before they reached me.

Koshka—a willowy female rider and scout even more daring than I in the sky—wearing armor embellished with sigiled bones, jogged easily beside me when she drew parallel. If there had been danger, she would have already informed me. No point in delaying. The rest of the five-rider team followed.

"Report," I said, despite having read an update before leaving.

"Seems abandoned, just like the others." She whistled for her own griffon. It dove straight down, as daring as its rider. She was in the saddle before all four feet touched the ground. During the last three-day, I had interacted with her enough to know she did a thorough job, was not easily rattled, and cared little for ceremony. Having qualified for the Bone Guard, I trusted her skill and loyalty more than most others.

"Any signs of disruption?" I asked as we moved closer.

"None." She tilted her head, her cat-like movements reflecting the predator whose bones she had bonded. "The cattle seem uncared for, the house undisturbed. We couldn't find any recent human traces, but the farm could hold a much larger herd. There is blood by one of the barns."

Feeling my unease, Cherny sped up. There was no reason to slaughter a lot of livestock in the middle of summer, even I knew that. While there were two harvests a year, and the lack of produce delivered to Tal by midsummer had triggered my father's orders, the cattle market did not happen until the Day of the Dead and the start of fall. Slaughtering the animals traditionally fed the festival as the first of each herd was gifted to the Goddess and people by the crown.

When we heard the calls of the lumbering shaggy, long-horned oxen, we left the griffons upwind. The others spread around me, those in the front carrying long spears at the ready while the rear gripped riding bone-bows. Like me, each had three short

spears strapped to their backs. All lightweight weapons adapted for flying.

Hunched over we barely rose above the grass as Koshka led us to the waiting scouts—a man and woman, short and willowy like most other long-distance riders due to their lower weight. Tempest would make an excellent scout if she learned to fly.

The leader signaled it was safe when she saw me, and I spun my short spear, ordering them to surround the pastures and work their way inward. No point in taking any risks.

Yahontov and Koshka stayed at my side while the others disappeared. At the count of one hundred, we crept forward, Koshka leading and Yahontov taking the rear, as suited a bodyguard. I tried to ignore the itch between my shoulder blades. The only man I truly trusted to have my back was dead.

Only the lack of bustle marked this farmstead as different. I had visited several during the winters I spent with the griffon riders when younger, and even then, when there was less work and the howling winds made you reluctant to leave the fires, there was always something happening. The blue paint on the three thatched dwellings was worn away to show the reeds and mud beneath, and the herd seemed smaller up close—only six oxen with gray in their wool, but even struggling, the farmstead should have housed at least fifteen adults and as many children.

We rounded the first house and tested the door. It opened without resistance. No one had locks out here, only a bar on the inside that would block intruders. The builders had not anticipated the need to ever lock from the outside.

A quick sweep of the house confirmed what I had surmised—no one had left in a hurry or taken much with them. The thick brown carpets woven from the undyed wool of the cattle outside, the aged hearth, and lack of finery proved that this had been a functioning if not prosperous place. Abandoned rather than attacked.

Two quick whistles followed by two long cut through the air. The others had found something.

I hesitated in the first room on the upper floor. Eight child-sized beds stood made as if waiting for their owners to return. A knitted ox lay on the floor. *Dropped?* Or did the owner not survive what happened here? Were they taken? Slavers sold children to workhouses and even less savory places on the coast. But why would someone come to this remote place?

"Nothing here," Yahontov said as the whistles sounded again.

I nodded.

A whole lot of nothing. Maybe the others had found an answer.

The sun stung my eyes as I exited, the itch between my shoulders growing. The wind sang of open places and my riders disturbing the peace in the largest barn, made to house the herd during winter storms. It had two lean-tos, presumably the smithy and butcher. Most work would happen outdoors, the sheds only meant to house tools.

As I entered the barn, the reason for the whistles stood out starkly against the pale hard-packed soil—the red brown of old blood had soaked into the earth and the air tasted of copper.

The wind, capricious in what tales it carried, now whispered of death.

"There couldn't have been enough people living here to cause this," I said, my heart heavy with the image of the empty beds.

Ivo, the rider who presumably had called out, nodded. "Based on the amount of blood, the culled herd outside and no other signs of battle, it's probably cattle. Damned the place." He spat on the ground. "No way the others will ever step inside willingly again. They can smell death. I'd guess at least thirty heads."

"Why slaughter them early?"

"Could have been illness," Koshka said, sniffing the air. "But they should still have arrived in Tal to sell."

One farm was proof of nothing. Maybe they had come to Tal, and I had not even learned of it.

"This isn't why I called, though." Ivo pointed to the blue-painted hide curtain covering the smithy's entryway.

As if there could still be hidden threats, Yahontov entered first. His suppressed grunt clenched my gut in a way Ivo's curses had not.

Death, the air breathed.

Instead of tools, a stick figure in blood, its dripping eyes meeting mine, decorated the wall. The bony limbs pointed accusatory at the sky, as if summoning the Goddess herself. The Spirit of Lowtown—again—but we were far from Tal and its politics. Or so I had thought.

Yahontov dug in the ashes with the butt of his spear, uncovering two charred skulls. The heat had cracked them open, the eye sockets splintered, but the human remains—thankfully adult—were unmistakable.

Images of the dead moving last night, barely seen in the dark, returned. A shiver ran down my neck. Would they have stopped if burned? Had there been other reasons for the fire in Lowtown?

"Sacrifices to ancient gods or burned to stop their Spirits from rising. Goddess protect me," Koshka said and Ivo spat on the ground again.

"Sacrificing humans has been outlawed for centuries," I said. "Even the Temple condemns it." My eyes drifted back to the bloody drawing on the wall. Not a stick figure, such as children drew. *A skeleton.* The warm day turned cold.

The others only nodded. What had happened here was far beyond the laws of Tal. Even in the city, I no longer knew how much they mattered.

The wind whispered of change. It was time for me to listen.

I studied each corner of the barn, smithy, and butcher, but found no more answers. The others gathered the remains, finding pieces from one more skull and splinters from larger bones. We would hang them in the Bone Grove and hopefully, it would be enough for their Spirits to make the journey to Tal.

Leaving the blood-soaked barn felt like returning to the land of the living. The wind sang of life hidden in the grass—predators waiting for us to leave. Humans no longer belonged here.

Without real hope, I ordered the scouts to fly further in search of the farmers who had lived here while the rest of us sped back to Tal. From their grim expressions, I knew that no matter the orders and politics which had pulled us into this search, we were now all committed.

The image of the blood-painted skeleton, of all the places I had seen it in Tal, replayed in my mind. Vanya had said it called for our blood. After what we had just seen, I did not doubt her. Tal was already bleeding; it just did not know it.

And those children... Dread twisted my stomach, stealing the joy of flying. I heard Eki's scream as they ordered our baby's death. What would make mothers and fathers leave their lives and livelihood? Where were they?

Back in the city, I washed myself and wrote a report for my father. The sun was already setting and despite my rumbling stomach I was not about to let my princess slip away. *If she even showed*, part of me whispered. What would I do if she was not there? If she hid, it was likely I would not see her again. Had I pushed her too far last night?

Rushing out of the palace, I avoided even Yahontov. When my bodyguard discovered I was not in the dining hall, he would scour the palace while cursing me. Fortunately, he was no mage, and the words would remain just that. If Tempest talked, it would be for my ears alone.

It was a risk I needed to take, for oath or not, there were things I could not let anyone hear. I had thought myself separate from what was happening in Tal, but as someone had supplanted my very bride, I had been wrong.

During the fire, I had been willing to die for my city. Now I needed to see if I was willing to live for it, for I had always known Tal would take it all. After what I saw today, my hurt feelings did not matter, nor did Tempest's reasons. She knew people I did not, people who had not told us who she was searching for, not even for gold. If she helped me find the missing food—and children—I could forgive the rest. Repeating it over and over, I almost believed I was doing more than inventing a reason to be close to her again.

Arriving at the Drunken Dead before the Spirits rose, I paused to look through the grimy windows.

My gaze jumped from table to table, empty stomach knotting. Of course, she had not come. I would have run if I was her.

The ice inside expanded as I withdrew. She was a liar and a thief. A weakness I could not afford to want.

I had been a fool to trust her offer of help.

Determined to find my own way through the city, I turned away and there she was.

I wanted to shout at her. Demand answers. Send her away. Throw her lies in her face. Tie her up in my chambers to keep her safe. Kiss her and chase away all thoughts of death.

Instead, I placed my hand over my heart in a formal greeting, unable to suppress the spike of impossible happiness as she crossed the street.

Vanya

He looked every bit the prince despite having replaced his black uniform with gray trousers and deep-blue coat, creased and carelessly open. The tilted hat hid half of his face, but he had forgone the eyepatch. The chance of someone seeing the mismatched eyes and guessing the crown prince walked Tal perhaps remote enough to accept the risk, or his peripheral vision too important to impede.

A thrill shot through me as I approached. In the lantern light and roguish clothes, he looked like someone I should walk away from but could not.

His sharp, clean-shaven jaw clenched.

Even those who normally cracked their knuckles to intimidate you as they passed, kept a wide berth. They, like me, sensed his power. He was solid in a changing world, and I wanted nothing more than to cling to him.

I had followed von Lemerch's coach for half a bell before losing it on the hectic Palace Road, and besides knowing she received no guests this afternoon, I had learned nothing. Had nothing to show. What would Dimitri do if I shared the letter and the terrible truths it contained now? Last night, he told me I had lied and lied. I needed to regain some of his trust before revealing I had stolen more and possibly poisoned his father, or he might dismiss it all as another kind of ploy.

When I was close enough, Dimitri offered me his arm, the movement smooth despite the carefully blank face.

"Tell me what happened last night," he said as he steered me toward an empty alley where no one would overhear rather than inside the drinking hall.

"Corpses walked—they attacked people. I've never seen anything like it…" I swallowed, longing to spill the words twisting inside me.

"But you know more than that."

How had I been able to keep so much from him while living in the palace? Could I explain Morovara was my great-grandmother when I could barely wrap my own mind around it?

"I asked around today." I licked my lips, carefully picking my words, and noticed his eyes tracking my tongue. The fire was still there, banked but not extinguished, but so was anger and betrayal.

"And?"

"I learned a strong necromancer can force the recently dead into bodies. That the mark you asked about"—I focused on Morovara's secrets instead of Ealhswip's—"is connected to the ones behind it."

Our eyes met.

His suspicion cut like a knife, carving away layers of deceit.

My hand itched to reach for the letter or for him. Which would push him away and bring him closer? Should that even matter?

He broke the connection first, turning toward the bustling street.

"They're attacking my people." He spread his free hand to encompass those passing by. "You and me—this plot regarding who I marry—doesn't matter compared to this. People don't speak to the guards, instead they seem to be killing them, for half of the patrols do not return. You know Tal. Help me find the food that should have arrived in the city. Find out why people uproot their lives and leave your Spirit of Lowtown behind."

"I think you overestimate my skills," I said reluctantly. "I'm…" I had been an indentured servant and a thief, a dancer and actor. All roles filled with lies.

His face hardened. "After all your words of kindness you won't even try? I think you owe me that much."

Shame burned my cheeks. Only bells ago at the temple, I had wondered how much he really cared. I had skills, magic, and connections. Just because I could not find my own twin, I should not give up before trying. I did owe him.

"You're looking for missing food?"

He nodded stiffly. "From the free farmsteads on the steppe—herds and people are missing. There are no records of either entering Tal."

"Much goes on in Tal without official records."

Something in his eyes softened. "Then you'll help?"

I patted our linked arms. "Come. Where there's food, people talk."

This time, I led us out of the alley, and stiffly but seemingly curious enough to not challenge me, he followed.

We walked like a normal couple might into Rivertown proper, where Talians and pilgrims alike enjoyed life on the hundreds of docked river barges and elaborate bridges, all illuminated by colored oil lamps swaying in the welcome breeze.

Despite the fire and plague bells ringing only days ago, no one here covered their faces or hands. The poor always lived in death's shadow.

Around us, men in unbuttoned coats and women with hiked dresses danced the night away to heady drums. On the next bridge, four girls sang for coin, their high voices piercing the night and telling the ancient tale of how the moon loved the sun. Once, I danced here, adding each penny to our debt repayment. It had never been enough.

We paused and to my surprise the prince dropped a coin into their cap. He did not need to. Most passed without a second look.

I only realized I'd tried to rub the debt sigil on my thigh when I found the bag instead. The mark was gone, but I had heavier burdens.

I turned, following Raius, one of the Taliell's arms. Dimitri did not resist. The touch was still formal, but the distance did not seem as great. We had a truce, even if it was only for tonight.

Two streets later, on the border to Midtown, we arrived at the Sinking Spoon.

Prices being what they were, it would not surprise me if more food than usual was smuggled in to avoid the royal tax. And if someone was selling food, the Sinking Spoon—a two-floor barge, supposedly named to trick fate—was the place to start. And their stew, full of herbs and sweet prunes, made a visit worth it anyway.

Like most of the Rivertown barges, the Sinking Spoon was not made to move. It had been built on the river decades ago and there it would stay. Despite its age, the shiny red paint showed no wear. Pebble—the dark-skinned Sorachian owner—had once been a sailor, though some said pirate, and he ran his barge as tight as any ship. No one would fight inside the Spoon. It was also one of the few places without the Spirit of Lowtown painted across the keel. Pebble would have skinned anyone who tried to mark his darling.

"They have information here?" Dimitri asked suspiciously as we walked across the wide gangplank.

I directed us up the steps to the second floor. "You're looking for food, where better? After ordering and tipping generously, we might get some answers as well."

We settled at the only free table on the riverside, allowing the breeze to chase away some of the wet heat. He sat opposite me, impatiently tapping his fingers. The delay might irk him, but if I was going to rebuild the trust between us, we needed to talk. The Wishmaker brought us together again. Surely, he would not let me down now.

"I have questions of my own," I said, still unable not to push until he pushed back. "If you really want me to help, that is."

His fingers stopped. "Tempest, I expect nothing else of you."

"I've never left Tal," I said, feeling silly. "Are there many farmsteads?"

His lips twitched. "There are, but they're not mapped, somehow the royal cartographers found our food producers below their notice, but from the scouts reports they should be in the high hundreds."

We paused as a server delivered steaming tea and I ordered the regular for us both. When alone again, Dimitri unfolded a half-finished map showing Tal as a star in the center and the steppes to the south.

He pointed to blue dots, most close to the Taliell's narrowing arms. "These are empty farms. At five of them, we found bloody stick figure drawings."

"And five is enough for you to notice?"

He leaned closer, our hands almost touching across the table. "You were right about me not seeing my own people, but my tutors were very clear about what a city the size of Tal requires to function—inflow of food was one of the most basic resources. No one wants to say it, but we depend on the independent farmers and herders."

"Then why did the king not do something sooner?" I asked, taking advantage of his sudden openness.

He shrugged, but a shadow of our earlier familiarity had returned, as if in the moment we could forget what had happened. This was not forgiveness, but perhaps a reminder that while on paper we had never made sense, alone we always had.

"There's always another issue," he said. "Usually, it resolves itself. The clans and farmers don't want us out there. Tal rules itself, and so does the steppes. Even cities like Denyev and Kope, which owe us allegiance and are governed by Talian nobles, strive for independence. No one has requested our assistance."

I considered his words, trying to find fault. People were dying and he had soldiers, did he not have a duty to help? "What

about the refugees sleeping in alleys? Could they even ask for assistance?"

"The courthouses are open to petitions; they go to the City Council first." He sipped his tea thoughtfully. "Maybe the royals should be more involved, but the line between caring and tyrant is a narrow one. Would you like my father to rule on all your issues?"

"Does he greet everyone like he did me?"

Dimitri barked a laugh. "Only those he deigns to acknowledge."

"Then I would never want him to leave his chamber."

Our mood quieted. His father had still been sick when I left. Possibly because of me.

"Why did you lead us—" Dimitri's question was cut off by an older, well-dressed man and less-than-dressed woman stopping at our table, the server followed behind as if he had directed them here. The prince looked up before angling his hat down and slipping the map back into his coat.

"Could we sit here?" the woman asked and winked at me. "The others are taken. We're all just looking for company. Perhaps you could move closer to yours."

Though still in coat and trousers, I had fussed over seeing the prince before heading to von Lemerch's manor, so instead of my normal boyish look, the two shirt buttons left open, wild hair reaching mid-back, and kohl-lined eyes made me unmistakable female. Despite my efforts they also marked me as poor. And Dimitri looked better than he had last night. In short, one way or another, he seemed to be paying for my company as surely as the man before me was for the woman.

I'd refused to let my stepfather use my looks to take advantage of his targets, had sworn to be nothing like my mother, and a month ago would have rebelled against even the implication that I might be a courtesan. Grief and Kirill's threats had kept me locked in the past as surely as the debt.

In the palace, the assumption would have made me blush with shame, as when Dimitri thought I tricked him into forgetting the crown, but after all that had happened to me, I found that others' mistaken opinions mattered less than they had.

I had shown Dimitri my truth, destroying any possibility of seduction to further someone else's aims. Whichever way we played this, he knew who I was.

With a raised brow, I sought his eyes, willing to take his lead. Surely, he would not want me anywhere close to him after how he flinched away last night. Instead of focusing on me, his dark stare was locked on the man. When Dimitri quickly jerked his chin in agreement and tilted his head so the wide-brimmed hat concealed him further, I hid my surprise behind a cheeky grin.

As I slipped in beside him and the other couple took the opposite seat, Dimitri pulled me into his lap and buried his face in my heavy curls. His hands slipped around my waist, and I gripped the table as heat gathered on my cheeks—among other places.

I sat rigidly, enjoying the touch too much, as the server delivered our food; Dimitri silently paid and tipped as instructed. The other woman ordered wine before kissing her man, while he leered in my direction. When his eyes finally closed as they kissed, the prince's nose brushed against my earlobe.

I shivered and fought the instinct to lean into him.

"Is this fine?" he whispered, his voice dark but for once, I did not think his anger was directed at me. "You never had issue pretending before but had there been a way to ask without drawing attention, I would've. One look and he would recognize me. It would be trouble for us both."

I twisted so my hair curtained both our faces. "And you want me to hide you? Should we leave?"

"He's a councilman, and the woman not his wife—this is an opportunity I cannot miss." Dimitri's hot breath coated my neck as he pulled me closer. "Are you willing to help me get her name without him noticing?"

"Mm," I managed and nodded, trying to remain clearheaded, for his intense tone did things it should not.

He wanted something from this councilor. Surprisingly, I did not mind playing along. The prince being in on the act, and us getting information on someone stepping out on his wife, did not prick my conscience like when Kirill wanted to use me. Or how my mother had lived, tricking only herself. And this was much better than him flinching away.

I placed a hand on his cheek, rough stubble pricking my palm. "What shall I call you tonight?" I whispered. "My lord?"

His eyes darkened and drifted to my lips before snapping back to mine. "How about Sasha? My mother picked it."

"*Sasha*." After his middle name—Alexandre. I tasted each syllable. It suggested a softer man than the hard notes of *Dimitri*. Perhaps the one Mariska and Alexei had told me he once was. "I'm yours for the night."

He tightened his arms around me with a dangerous glint in his shadowed eyes. "You make it very hard to be angry at when you say it like that, seated in my lap."

"You pulled me up here."

A devious smile I had not seen before but knew I would not forget, lifted his lips. "So I did. Are you still playing a part, Tempest?"

"Only if you ask me to."

His hand drifted down to clench around my thigh, and I squirmed as my insides clenched. *The other couple might be*

watching, I told myself as our eyes and noses met under the hat's shadow.

The giggle of the courtesan broke the moment. Dimitri placed a light kiss to my cheek, whispering, "Get her name then."

With a too-real flush, I started on the food I knew to be delicious but could no longer taste.

The other couple had ordered a bottle of expensive plum wine and when I caught the woman's eye, I nodded to it.

"Is that good?"

"You wanna try? We can get another bottle, right, love?"

The noble man waved for the server, uncaring for the cost. The courtesan and I shared a knowing smile. Everything the woman ordered was marked up and she earned half. I might never have wanted my mother's profession, but I knew how it worked.

"You should try the stew. It's the best in the city," I said in return. "Sasha, you should invite them."

Still hidden partly in my hair, Dimitri mumbled with a dark voice I barely recognized, "Whatever you wish, Tempest."

"Tempest?" the other man laughed. "You don't look Sorachian."

He narrowed his eyes. If he recognized the prince, he might well have seen me as the princess. Sorachians and other far away coastals took the names of items and professions. Where I was pale white, they were dark. Their curls tighter than my loose waves.

"I'm Talian. A mix of all." I smiled back, able to play the role I had promised not ever to do because I knew in my heart it would never be truth. It was freeing to let go of the weight of the past. Dimitri's very real roaming hands and distracting heat, us working together, made all the difference. If he needed the name of this woman, I trusted him.

"You remind me of someone. Who's your mistress? Maybe we could meet another time?" Perhaps he desired a taste of a princess he could not have.

I shivered under his leering gaze, the woman—Vsadnik-looking like the prince, with straight black hair, sun-kissed skin, and dark eyes—frowned.

"She's taken," Dimitri snapped, before I was forced to answer. "Look at her like that again and you won't ever need a woman again."

A different kind of heat warmed me. His arms were like Morovara's blanket, cozy, safe, and, in this stolen moment, mine.

Only Lumi had stood up for me before, and this felt nothing alike. He might want the woman's name, but despite how I had lied to him, he risked revealing himself as if he could not stop the words.

"No offense meant," the other man said as the drinks came and even filled our ceramic cups himself. "If she's private, you just needed to say so. Some prefer variety."

We lifted the cups in unison with a mumbled "For Tal" and drank the sweet plum wine. For it to be this cold, they must have kept the bottles on the bottom of the Taliell.

As Dimitri slid me to the side so he could eat, I caught the eyes of the other woman.

"We good?" I lowered my voice so that she had to bend closer. "Tempest isn't even my real name. I'm V."

She nodded. "Not your fault. I'm Esfir, work for Madam Jian."

To whom Lumi and I had almost been sold. The chained-heart tattoo with a debt sigil in the center on Esfir's wrist brought back everything that happened, from breaking in to Mekeln's mansion to stealing the crown and acting the princess. It had led to betrayals and death, but meeting this woman's tired eyes and seeing the man who had bought her for the night fondle her as he ate, I could not regret it.

The prince's long fingers squeezed my thigh, not an inch below the bag with the stolen letter, and I remembered there were more truths I owed him. But those thoughts were easy to push aside when he whispered in my ear again.

"I won't lie, if you don't stop moving like that, I'll be no better than *him*." Dimitri's rough voice held a delicious tension.

"Sasha," I said and twisted in his lap. "Nothing between us is a lie."

"There's nothing else between us." His hand traveled up to play with the buckles on my thigh, his actions contradicting his words.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, remembering how clothes had loosened and kisses turned ravenous that last night in the palace.

"You want to get out of here?" I brushed my lips against the corner of his mouth, an almost-kiss for this almost-moment. My magic wormed its way through the cracks in his walls to find a hunger matching my own as our lips hovered close.

"I—" He bit off whatever was about to come next, and I knew he would kiss me, knew we would not stop, but I also felt the distrust that had not previously been there. We were physically close, nothing else.

"If there's food on the market, Pebble will know," I said and spun out of his lap, pulling him along as if starting a dance between the tables. Some patrons laughed while others shouted for us to watch our step. No one was focusing on his face.

Rushing down the stairs, Dimitri caught me around the waist just as I was about to crash into the server coming up. Both laughing we apologized and continued slower to the bar at the stern.

"You still throw me around." Amusement danced in his eyes, the blue more summer sky than ice, the brown almost black when the corners crinkled together. I wanted to disappear into that darkness.

"I might have worn other clothes and had better table manners, but otherwise it was all me."

He stopped me in front of the bar. "That man was Councilor Mars Heridan." Dimitri swallowed, looking over my head and I recognized his reluctance and grief. "He's one of the people who voted with my father to kill my child… I couldn't pass up the opportunity for getting leverage. Thank you."

His thumb stroked my cheek, and despite how we had been seated before, I blushed as my heart swelled. I had not expected him to share his reasons. Had not expected him to trust me with anything yet.

"Will someone care he was seen with a courtesan?"

"Marriage vows are holy—or should be. You're right that they're broken too often, but in this case, it matters quite a lot. All his wealth comes from his wife's family, and I know they're protective of her. To ensure she wasn't being robbed, they made him sign additional contracts before the wedding. I don't remember the details, but believe he broke at least one up there."

"That's… unconventional." How many married men had my mother entertained? Had any of them risked similar consequences when they came to our apartment? Threatened her to stay silent? Perhaps that was why she had agreed to marry Kirill and all that came with it. One horrible client—a husband—was still better than a cast of others.

"Whatever you use the information for, he deserves it. Just… don't let the woman get hurt."

"It's not her fault," he easily agreed and must have seen the surprise on my face. "I might not understand much of your life, or those around us, but I know everyone does what they need to survive. If it hurts no one, she doesn't deserve to be shamed for it. Least of all by me."

How different from how he spoke when we met. Or perhaps I had heard what I wanted, wishing to condemn the handsome prince, and seeking a reason to keep myself separate.

Neither of us had known the other, but we were starting to.

"Let's find your missing food," I said, directing us onward.

Pebble—bald, wide, and with eyes dark enough I wondered if he colored the lashes—dressed to match the Sinking Spoon. His coat was as red as the dress I had worn to three-day worship when I was pushed off a balcony and discovered my magic and starched shirt perfect black. From behind the bar, he commanded the staff, solved problems before they arose, and discreetly vetted those who sought entrance to the gambling den below the surface. The Sinking Spoon had been a place where Kirill's loans were too often spent.

When we stopped before him, I expected Dimitri to take the lead, but he remained silent as Pebble looked us over.

He nodded to me. "Kirill's girl. Who're you looking for? You'll find trouble today. With the old bat dead, many thought their debts gone as well."

"I'm here for information instead of money."

Pebble grunted and focused on the prince. "And you?"

"Sasha," he said and quickly tilted the hat up, then looked down as if shy.

"As this girl has nothing to spend on information—usually has nothing at all to spend—I assume you're the one who's looking for answers."

I leaned into Dimitri. "We both are. It's nothing that'll cause trouble."

Pebble grinned, flashing two gold teeth. "Oh, you're all trouble, girl, but you've never brought any to my ship that I didn't deserve."

I smiled in response, hoping he saw the gratitude in my eyes. More than once, he had fed me and Lumi for free.

"We're looking for food entering Tal without passing through the official channels," I said. "And the people who bring it."

"There's no more than usual—less with the royals buying up everything for the Day of the Dead."

Dimitri tensed. "It would be a lot—hundreds of cattle."

Pebble snorted. "Have you seen the food prices? If that kind of meat was sold for cheap, most would be gnawing on a rib. Instead, I have to haggle and fight to get enough for the Spoon."

"What if someone's waiting for the price to increase even more?" the prince asked.

Pebble shook his head. "Then they'd have to wait until winter. At the festival the royals'll finally open the coffers, and we'll all eat well—more than usual with the wedding—and that's the start of fall markets. If anyone had food, now would be the time to sell for maximum profit. Ask around, everyone with any sense will tell you the same."

Dimitri looked like he would argue again when Pebble raised his hand to stop the words.

"There's nothing more than you see. If you want black-market food, you'll have to go to the farmsteads yourself and buy it up. I'm giving you this for free because there's nothing to know."

The prince slid two silver coins across the bar. "And if someone went to the farmsteads and brought in the food without anyone noticing, how would they do it?"

The coins disappeared into Pebbles large hands. "If someone was stupid enough to do all that and not sell, they might bribe the night guard at North Gate and store it in the Gateways. Though if you're stupid enough not to sell, who's to say you're smart enough to hide it all?"

Dimitri nodded, seemingly satisfied. I placed a hand on his arm. "Any guard who might be talkative?"

Pebble tapped on the bar until the prince slid over another coin. “Runner’s a good man. Say you came from me and bring that wallet. If something’s going on, he might talk.”

“Thank you,” I said and meant it. “For all the times…”

Pebble’s face softened. “Take care of yourself, girl. This city is getting worse. In Sorach we only had pirates to contend with.” He turned to the prince. “Pleasure of doing business with you, *Sasha*. This is a good one, no matter what mess she might have gotten herself into.”

“I’m starting to realize that.”

Regret flashed in Dimitri’s eyes. Before I could read more, he offered me his arm and turned away. Back to the royal, distant and proper.

Still, as we crossed the gangplank arm in arm, I soared so high on hope that I did not feel my feet hit the ground. It did not matter that he played a role earlier. We had done so together—and I knew he had enjoyed it.

The letter burned against my side. He did not question me again, but I knew he needed answers to trust me. I would find him some—or find him someone else who could explain. Then I would give him everything and hope it did not crush the fluttering thing between us.

As we walked toward North Gate, I promised myself I would find a clue. *But you already have one*, my inner voice said, *the bloody mark means it is all connected. Ealhswip and cults and empty farms.*

There were still too many missing pieces for me to see the game—why did the wedding have to happen? Was the gate Morovara mentioned the same one Ealhswip sought under the crypt? How did it connect to the glass crowns? And where was my sister?

There was one more place I could search.

A place even I would not risk bringing a disguised prince.

Nobody fooled Popova.

The silence between me and Dimitri stretched as the crowded streets grew wilder. Twice someone pushed into us, forcing closer us together.

I was too wrapped up in my own problems to notice the hard notes of violence vibrating in the air before it was too late.

Dimitri

A woman somewhere ahead of us yelled. I only caught a few words above the rumbling of the crowd, but they were enough. *Death to the nobility. Bring Tal forward. Take what you're owed*.

I tilted my head down and pressed closer to Tempest as more people spilled onto the street. If they recognized me here, I would be torn apart and it did not matter what consequences my father might enact later.

More raised their voices; the wind whispered of danger.

I grabbed for Tempest but while I paused, she had continued ahead. This was her world and she'd showed me more than once that she could take care of herself, still anger and fear narrowed my vision when two men pushed between us. She was short enough to disappear instantly in the sea of shoving, elbowing, cursing people.

Pushing to get to her, I became one of them as the animalistic terror of being trampled tried to make me turn and run again and again. Not without her.

Growing up in the spacious palace, training on Cherny with the griffon riders on the steppe and then sent to the mountains, this was more people than I had ever experienced without guards to keep them back. Wind whisperers naturally desired open spaces, and I fought to not close my eyes as the noise rolled over me.

Ahead, someone cried in pain.

Find her, I begged the wind. Let Tempest not be trampled.

More people shouted, their voices turning into fear as others pushed up from behind to hear whatever the speaker ahead was spewing. I saw her now—a woman standing on tables stacked into an impromptu stage at the crossroad. The wind carried her words to me.

Tal is meant for all. Claim it. Join together. They let us burn. The world is changing. So can we. None can stand against us.

Around her, people cheered, unaware of the chaos they caused further down the narrow street. I spun, searching for Vanya. There were too many faces. The squeeze too tight. I wore two hidden blades but pulling them here might be what sets off a stampede. The orator had one thing right—here, no one could stand against the masses.

A group with hidden faces threw rocks through store windows, kicked in doors and tore through the insides.

Someone staggered into me, clutching my arm to not be pulled down. Seeing the grinning boy no older than twelve, I fought the instinct to free myself. He probably thought himself untouchable still. Would he listen to the speaker and rush the palace one day? Would my guards cut him down?

He slipped and the point became moot. To fight any battle, we needed to survive today. With magic and a few precise punches, I forced those next to us momentarily back and pulled him up.

His wide-eyed stare told me he finally understood the danger.

There, the wind said.

My eyes snapped up to the roof on our right. A small figure crouched at the ledge, as if ready to dive back down.

Safe. My Tempest was wonderfully safe. In this moment, I could think of her no other way. Claiming her on the barge had been for show; here, silently in my heart, it was something else. Something I did not dare to examine too closely, for it was stupid, proved me an easily steered pawn, and she surely did not feel the same.

But if they killed her here—meaninglessly, unknowingly, destroyed someone so wonderfully alive—I knew my revenge would equal whatever my father might have proposed. Griffons would descend. The prison fill. With blade and coin, I would continued until I found the orator and made her pay. I might have hated myself for it afterward, but I had long accepted I would ruin myself for revenge. For—

I fought for each step, closer and closer, the boy still clinging to my coat. Without magic, we would not have made it. I did

not possess a lot, but sometimes even a little is enough to give you the necessary advantage.

Spotting me, Vanya waved us toward the dead-end alley where roses climbed the house walls. *That's how she got three floors up?*

People stood packed in the alley, watching the street with horror. We all knew that we would be squeezed to death if enough thought they could escape through here.

The boy let go of me and scrambled up to Vanya without so much as a nod in my direction. Ungrateful little bastard. I hoped never to see him again, for I feared then we would be on opposite sides.

I attempted to follow. The wood trellis cracked, then snapped.

Tempest—her face pale and hair wild—bent over the edge as if to breach the distance between us and pull me up.

"Stay there!" I called and settled against the wall to wait it out.

The woman next to me rubbed my coat sleeve between her fingers. I slapped her hand away, but there was nowhere to go when she smiled toothlessly.

"Fine fabric that. Fine accent. You don't belong here."

More of the people waiting out the rioting turned to watch.

"There's no need—" I started only for the heavyset man next to her to cut me off.

"What do you know of need? Those out there stamped and stole all the fruit in my stand, when really they want your kind."

"Think of this like a tax," the woman said, stretching to riffle through my coat pockets. "The Wishmaker blessing me."

I slapped her hand away again. Would giving away the money I carried appease them?

"Get away from him!" Tempest called and despite having no idea where we stood with each other, I knew she would not stay up there and let them rob me.

All was fabricated between us but what I felt on the street, thinking I might lose her, was real. The anger in her voice now was real.

"Got himself a little tart," a lanky man snickered. "Perhaps she can pay a bit as well. Only fair he shares."

When Heridan propositioned her at the barge earlier, something inside me had snapped. As this stranger leered at the woman above me, anger so black I barely recognized it awoke.

"*Don't*," I said, voice quiet.

Feet scraped against the wall above me. She would not stay away. It was not in her nature to run.

Five people faced me. The street outside no longer mattered.

"Think noble boy needs a lesson in sharing," the woman said, waving the others forward.

The heavyset man had only shifted his weight, readied to throw the punch he surely thought would knock me out, when my fist struck his temple.

The female guards in the Tower, our finest bone soldiers and Roja, had trained me as a child. Zakhar continued with weapons when I left their care. In the mountains, I had done little besides practice.

I could fight on uneven ground, from griffon, and with a hand tied behind my back. Multiple opponents were always a risk, but knowing Tempest was behind me and what they would do to her if I fell, overrode reason.

The woman pulled a knife. I disarmed her, snapping her wrist in the process. *Make them fear you*. That had been my father's lesson. Battle was as much mental as physical. Only from the killing blow did I halt myself. Snapping her neck would have been easy, but death… perhaps even like this I was too weak.

I took the next man's punch on my forearm before ramming my elbow into his chest and throwing him to the ground.

The world narrowed, the wind whispering as each opponent moved. I spun with it, movements flowing. In the abandoned courtyard, Vanya had likened it to a dance. If so, it was the only one I had mastered.

Each step was precise. Each blow blocked or ducked. My vision narrowed further.

Then I stood alone, breathing hard, bruised but unhurt.

Behind, the wind said, and I spun, fist raised and balance shifted for the follow-up kick.

Tempest's wide emerald eyes stopped me like nothing else had.

She lifted a hand, as if approaching a wild and possibly dangerous animal.

"Dim—Sasha?"

I lowered my fists, relaxed my fingers, and something on the ground moved.

The large man had come to—he rose, knife in hand.

Vanya stood between us.

Time seemed to slow as he lunged, and I wrapped my arm around her.

He cut my forearm as I spun. Then my own knife, so far untouched, was in my free hand. Before he could attack again, my blade pierced his chest.

This man got no last blessing or word like Zakhar had. Did not get my regret.

Tempest pulled me away, and without letting her out of my arm, we ran.

While I fought, the street outside had cleared. Only broken people and goods littered the cobbles as if to show me what

would soon become of Tal, and I did not know how to stop it.

Vanya

The apothecary bell jingled as I opened the door, my mind still stuck on Dimitri's fight yesterday. His movements had been like water, his face cold, almost unbothered, until that man attacked me. I had seen many killers when working for my stepfather. Avoided them. But when Dimitri pressed me close, I'd only wanted to stay.

On Palace Road, busy no matter what else happened in the city, we had said our goodbyes, both unable to meet the other's eyes. I had wanted to thank and condemn him. To kiss and press close. To ask forgiveness and confess all I could. To bring him back to my hidden theater attic, remove his coat, and ease my hands under his shirt, and complete what we started that final night in the palace.

Then he'd stepped back, eyes flashing with emotions I could not read, and was gone.

And here I was, more desperate for answers than ever. The words shouted yesterday had been too familiar. I needed to find my sister.

The glass windows in Popova's shop had been replaced, the singed wood cleaned and painted. Inside, the well-to-do mixed with the poor, purchasing potions and herbal remedies. From the steady stream of customers, it seemed Popova was doing better than ever.

Only the nobles could go to the healers. The rest of Tal would be turned away at the hospital gates. So we had Popova, the Witch of Lowtown. Maybe she was no more witch than I was—much like a noble, she kept the flavor of her magic secret. Not only did she heal, for a price, she hurt. She, Kirill, and Keep—head of the workers by day, thugs by night—were the unquestionable Lowtown powers. Or had been. Would my stepsister really step up to take her father's place?

Two years ago, I had pounded on Popova's door and asked her to heal Lumi and paid the steep charge for her services—making it impossible for us to escape Kirill. On the night of the fire, Lumi told me Popova was the one who had cursed away our magic. She was the source not only of my debt but the inherited one from our mother.

Popova had unleashed Lumi's magic that night, and afterward, my twin somehow found our great-grandmother. Perhaps after discovering her death magic, she'd gone to the temples in search of answers.

I had passed Popova's shop daily, greeted her politely if I ever saw her, and all the while she had known what should have been my secrets. Conspired with Lumi while leaving me in the dark. Stealing my sister from me.

Unknowingly, I had worked my whole life to pay a woman who held the secrets of our past. The least she owed me was answers, for Lumi had slipped that Popova introduced her to the rebels.

If anyone could find my sister, it was Popova. She was also the last person I wanted to cross.

During the fire, she saved me and Alexei by speaking up, unknowingly protecting the Crown Prince of Tal. I did not assume her unexpected compassion would be repeated today.

A dark-skinned girl, presumably a grandchild or possibly great-grandchild, even younger than me stood behind the counter wearing a pristine apron with her hair in a thick braid, not a strand escaping. When she turned to show the waiting customer something in a glass jar, I strode past before she could stop me.

Prior to playing a princess, I would never have dared enter the back rooms without permission.

Releasing my hold on the magic enough to sense which rooms were empty, I strode down the hallway. Lumi and von Lemerch were cold, Dimitri wild behind his walls, and at the end of the corridor, I sensed something new. A soft note, twisting itself into the others' melodies.

Without hesitation, I opened the last door.

A single person, her energy angular and hard, sat inside.

The old, black woman, gray hair in a proper bun and dress more appropriate for Upper Midtown or North's Place, looked up from her desk as I entered. Where Morovara appeared frail, no one would associate that word with Popova. But she was still

old and I young.

Before she could rise, I placed my hands over hers and pressed them onto the table. Magic danced from me to her, enough that I would know if she lied.

And I had no doubt she would lie.

"Where's my sister?"

"You should have left Tal," Popova said, outwardly unbothered by my sudden appearance. "This is no place for innocence."

I smiled without an ounce of friendliness, feeling her hidden tension through our touch.

"You've talked to her."

The music pitched in recognition.

"And you've found your magic." Popova leaned closer, interest playing inside her. "That display on the street was truly remarkable. And when the griffon arrived—a lorist's tale on my very own doorstep."

I tensed. "Why didn't you tell me what I was?"

"I respected your mother's and sister's wishes and let you be. If it had been up to me, you'd have been trained and put to use—a bloodline such as yours shouldn't be wasted."

No one was using me ever again. "What about my wishes?"

"If I hadn't feared for your sister's life had she not learned to control her powers, I would never have said anything. You paid me to help her, and I did my best, girl, despite being given much more for my silence long ago."

There was truth behind the words spilling out of her. "Lumi paid you to not tell me?" *Had she kept money from me as well?*

"Your mother paid me when you were five. I bound your powers, splitting you and your sister."

"Why would she do such a thing?"

A distant expression swept over her face. "You and your sister communicated mind to mind. First people joked about twins, but then you started talking to others inside *their minds*. It was when your mother realized that you commanded the living and dead, just before your fifth birthday. One of you—it doesn't matter which one because you were one person in two bodies—commanded her to get you matching blue dresses you'd seen in Midtown. She tried to say no, but before she knew it, she had stolen the dresses and was pursued by the store owner. You'd taken over her mind. A three-day later she came to me with the jewels your father had given her and told me to do whatever I could to make you normal. When it wasn't enough, she returned with more money and a golden wedding band on her finger."

Lumi and I had truly been one? Was this sense of losing her an effect of a curse that'd lasted too long? *Why did no one tell me anything?* This was my life. I could not question my mother, so Popova got my anger. "We had magic and Mother paid you to remove it?"

"Think it through, girl. Someone would have come for you. You were too powerful, too strange to pass without training. Use you or kill you, either way they would have taken you from everything you knew. You would have become weapons instead of children. I offered to take you in. Your mother said you had to stay with her. That your father would come. Getting yourself involved in this mess goes against all her wishes."

Popova believed her words, but she did not know what we had gone through. My mother would not have wanted this if she'd known what her decisions would lead to. And even if she had, I was done living to please her. I would be kind, I would work for a better tomorrow, but it would be on my terms.

"What did you do to me?" I whispered.

"I did what she asked—spent my second curse on you two. Binding your magic and thus separating you and your sister. You developed into your own person, not part of someone else. You got a childhood."

"And two years ago?"

"Truly valuing something above your own life breaks the curse because that is ultimately what you risk. For your sister it was revenge on those who hurt her. That girl didn't care what it did to her." Popova searched my face. "What was it for you? Duty? Grief? Love? During the fire, you stood for a *guard*. Was he worth throwing away your life? We all heard your call. That's power, girl. If you work for me, I'll give you what you value."

I ignored her comments, caught in memories of how I had found my sister collapsed in Kirill's courtyard when I returned from my one and only dalliance. I had been excited to tell her all about it until I saw her split face and heard her fever ramblings. *Revenge above her own life*.

"Why did she keep it from me?" *Why did Lumi, smart, cautious, calculating Lumi, keep taking such risks?* The bond was still there, floating in the back of my mind—reduced, distant, but there.

Popova leaned across the table until her forehead almost touched mine. "Pain does strange things to people. Your sister wants Tal to be better. Wants us all to be better, no matter the risks. Tal is a kettle set over the flames long ago. Each time it boils over they slam on the lid again, but if enough water escapes even the fire will die."

I calmed my breaths. This was about more than me and my family. "Do you know where the food is? Do you work with the one who hired us a month ago?"

Fear flashed through Popova, and she looked like she wanted to spit on the pristine floorboards. "Like being ruled by the

Temple will be any better than the royals. Too many believe *her* and her corrupted priestesses though. They want blood, and not just the royals'. Your sister informed me—sensed her—and we made our own deal. I know nothing of any missing food."

When I was a girl, my mother took me here to buy tonics and tinctures. The pungent scents brought back memories of sharply dressed customers arriving on the poor street. Popova had already been a power then. Until now, I had not realized part of me thought she might have all the answers. What could I, or even Dimitri, do against an undead queen? Lumi had been working with Popova after learning about Ealhswip from Morovara. Lumi had organized the break in at the Mekeln manor. If there was anything I knew about my sister, it was that she did not act without a plan. Why could she not have shared it with me?

"But surely you're already doing something?" The words came out small despite my confident front.

Popova shook her head. "Child, we all make our own moves. I do what I can to protect our streets—those *unnatural things* will not break into Lowtown homes again. But don't leave your dead behind, for there is no knowing what might happen to them—I cleaned up your mess. *Once*."

"Alexei and Kirill?"

When she nodded, I did not dare to ask for details, fearful what the answer might be. One I hoped she had thrown into the Taliell, the other deserved last rights and a place in the Grove. Dimitri might want answers, but this was not one that would give him any peace.

As the chance of external help vanished, my resolve hardened. "If I bring you a chance to stop the priestesses, will you help?"

I held my breath, emotions passing through her too fast for me to understand.

"Offer me a real opportunity, and we can talk, little heart turner."

I pulled my hands away. Despite my suspicions, every word had been truthful.

Two notes combined inside me—a seed of a plan. Something I could bring to Dimitri and Lumi as a partner instead of a beggar. At Morovara's, I'd thought I could be a bridge. But if I was to bring people together, I needed my other half.

"And my sister, where is she?" I asked, repeating my initial question.

"Family is the most important thing in the world. I have built my success on it. Power flows from one generation to the next. But I have also built it on never breaking my word."

"Then you'll keep her from me?"

Popova leaned forward. "Magic like your sister's comes once a generation. So does yours—if you learn to use it before it overwhelms you. Come back when I cannot refuse you."

I left the room without bothering to argue. I would never use my power to force someone to comply—if I could even do such a thing. When I called the griffon from the sky, it was a plea, not enforcing my will. I lived under Kirill's thumb long enough to know I never wanted to force another to obey me.

Lumi had come here, and while I was no longer a thief, I was not above applying my hard-won skills to search for clues of her plans and whereabouts. When next would I have a chance to be unobserved in Popova's home?

I tapped the next door down the hall, and when the lack of response and magic confirmed the room was empty, I slipped inside a storage room. Luckily, Popova's well-maintained house seemed to have neither creaking floorboards nor locked doors. Who would be bat-bitten enough to steal from the Witch of Lowtown?

The crack in the door allowed the afternoon sun to seep inside and illuminate tight-packed shelves. One side held labeled glass beakers and bottles with colorful ribbons around their necks—red for luck, white for death, green for life, and black for the rest. All a thief's dream but none would hold clues to my sister's plans. The other two walls were much more curious. Gears and springs, molded together for purposes I could not even guess at. Lumi would have loved them for she had forever hovered around the night market booths from Sorach, wanting to snatch a machine only to pick it apart and reveal its mysteries.

The machines were marked by the same colored ribbons—*how could something powered by steam bring luck? Life?* I brushed my fingers over them, finding impressions in the metal invisible in the low light. My fingers itched. I could take one, no one would notice. Perhaps Dimitri would know what it was. But… I was no thief.

Repeating it silently to myself. I watched Popova's relatives walk past outside. I kept my hands to myself until the corridor was empty, and left, her treasures untouched.

Magic and low chatter told me the next rooms were occupied. Without being seen, I scurried up the stairs.

Popova owned the whole block, but after looking inside a few rooms, I surmised the second floor was separated from the rest of the business and held personal living spaces. The search was painfully slow, for more than once someone came upstairs, and I had to hide.

When only two empty rooms remained, I eased out of another closet but refused to leave empty-handed. There must be something. Testing the next door, I almost walked straight into the wood before realizing this one, unlike all the others, was locked.

Excited, I wet my lips and wished for my sister's lockpicks. Pressing my eye against the keyhole, I saw a room missing the personal touches the others had. The drawn curtains made me first mistake the raised form on the bed as pillows.

Then it groaned.

I flinched back, heart pounding. Had they heard me pull at the door handle? Were they about to call out? How had I not felt someone inside?

Opening my inner wall further, I directed the magic. First there was nothing—not the cold touch of the undead or warmth of life. Then a shadow of a person, so faint I barely recognized it. Could it be someone sick with the plague, locked away to separate them from the rest of the family? Could the truths in the letter I carried help the one inside?

I pressed against the wall, feeling a sense of responsibility I never had before. Raised voices and footsteps approached too fast from somewhere in the back rooms. I should not have lingered. Thieving should have taught me better.

With no other option, I rushed to the final door, thanking the Wishmaker when the handle turned and it swung open.

Inside, gears and cogs lined the window shelf and books covered the floor. It reminded me of the table in the prince's chambers. More, it reminded me of my sister. The sick person, responsibility and fear of discovery all slipped my mind.

This was her room.

Hoping luck would stay with me, I flipped pages and searched for any trace of what she planned. A thin book described the governance of Sorach, where anyone with a set amount of money could vote on who should lead the city. Another exalted the power of the masses, stating enough sheep could take down a wolf. In the corner lay badly printed pamphlets, blaming the royals for anything from the taxes to uneven streets.

Lumi's views had never been laid before me so clearly, but they did not bring any surprises. I had listened to my sister for years. She wanted change and was willing to fight for it. That she favored Sorach with its votes and machines was no surprise. Once, we dreamt of going there together to build the life we'd dreamt up under the stars.

While none of this told me where she was now, it did prove one thing—she was coming back here. I only needed to wait.

With another place to add to my growing surveillance list, I snuck downstairs again and left through the back door.

The afternoon heat wrapped around me. Whatever Popova was, her place remained unnaturally cool, the air outside a sticky, oppressive blanket threatening to suffocate.

I staggered. Finding my sister's hideaway should have made me happy. It was progress. Even the meeting with Popova had gone as well as she could. So why did invisible hands squeeze my heart? Dread squirm in my belly?

I stopped in the shadowed tunnel dividing the courtyard from the alley to gather myself. I knew more than before, had a path forward, and still it seemed like too little, too late. *How would I find the time to hover outside Popova's shop without drawing her attention?*

The sweet scent of rambling roses wrapped around me, an arch thick enough to hide sky and stone. Their stalks shoot straight up, only bending to support the heavy, pink flowers on top, their wicked thorns protecting them from passersby. The cultivated roses grew lower, their blossoms easily reachable and thorns spread or all gone. To live wild in Tal, you had to grow your own thorns and risk hurting those who dared to come close.

Perhaps if I spread my magic into everyone's minds again and pleaded, Lumi would finally answer and we could skip all the steps in between. Why hold back if they already knew what I was? Would Popova respect me then? This was about more than us. If Dimitri was willing to work with me, he was able to put hurt—and all other—feelings aside.

If I wanted to belong, I would have to do the same. Risk everything.

I removed my magic walls.

Risk Ealhswip's wrath.

The magic stretched, encompassing the block.

Risk opening my heart to Dimitri.

I focused on my sister's face. Asked the magic to show it to everyone. To beg to know where she was.

Risk—

I froze. My magic hummed in greeting, a tune that had been part of my life for so long it barely registered as it increased.

A person in pants and shirt stood outlined against the sun, like an absence rather than an individual. Like with Morovara, the magic slipped over them.

I pressed back until the thorns caught in my clothes, shock overriding the song as they stepped out of the blinding sun. Her hair was shorn, scar displayed without care, and gait confident, but there was no mistaking my sister.

"What are you doing here?" Lumi demanded as the shadows enveloped us both. Clearly, she was not as surprised to see me as I was her. "Everywhere I go, I'm told you've asked for me. Then they tell me guards follow, asking even more questions. Do you know what it has cost the rebels to keep them silent?"

"I'm here to help." Same words I offered the prince. From my sister's eyes, I knew she did not believe them any more than he had. Anger mixed with the dread inside me. "What did you want me to do when you disappeared?"

"Did you consider anyone could have followed your trail—even those who placed you in the palace to start with?"

I flushed, knowing I had been inconspicuous. I almost called out to everyone around us in the most conspicuous way of all. If von Lemerch did not know we were mages, I could have given away our only advantage. *My usual idiocy*, my sister used to call it.

"Lumi, I—"

"First you help the royals, stand up for them even in Lowtown, and now you come here for me? What if Popova decides I'm too much of a liability?"

"We don't have to fight, Lumi. Alexei and Dimitri are—were—good. Do you even know who von Lemerch is?"

She raised an eyebrow and I wanted to shake her.

"I met our great-grandmother, the one you kept from me," I snapped, "and I think von Lemerch is Ealhswip, back from the dead."

"The dead divine ruler who sold Tal out to the Vsadnik *for love*?" Lumi laughed. "You always loved stories, V. She isn't normal, you've got that right, and she works with the temple, but I'll bring her down. She's just another noble with powers she hid from the world, one who wants to take Tal for herself and made an alliance with disgruntled priestesses. With her powers, how could they reject her?"

I snapped open the satchel and threw the letter at her. "And this? It's not a story."

Lumi caught it against her chest. Her face transformed as she read—from dismissive to confused to angry.

"Where did you get this?"

"Von Lemerch ordered me to steal it from the king's own chambers. It's *real*. There is no such thing as the plague. Our mother was murdered. All the people burned that year were murdered. Von Lemerch did it."

I tasted my sister's anger and confusion. Until now, she had hid her emotions.

Lumi shook her head. "The plague has come every few decades."

I thought back and realized something. "Always before the Day of the Dead. She needs the recently dead. She's using them for something." *Like powering her undead body.*

Lumi paced in the narrow tunnel, only three small steps each way. "New Spirits are easier to control. The old ones you must negotiate with, and most have been placated by the Temple." She paused, plans and possibilities running behind eyes matching the dark foliage around us. "Have you seen her at the palace? Can she pass the sigils?"

I thought back. She ordered me to steal the letter outside the gate, and I had assumed she was leaving the palace. During my welcome banquet, I had searched for her to no avail. And during three-day worship. Despite the effort she put into passing me off as the princess, she had stayed away even before Flora arrived, ordering Lana to report back instead. Was it strange for a Council member to not attend these events? But one time she had undeniably been there.

"Once. Under the Women's Tower. There's a crypt with the Goddess's face."

Lumi relaxed. "Then she cannot be undead. Those are the strongest sigils in Tal. No Spirits, in a body or not, would be able to pass. She's a necromancer, who has found a way to heal herself and control death itself."

"How do you know?" If von Lemerch was that old, she might well have ways we could not imagine. Until last three-day, I had been sure Spirits were interchangeable, only the energy we left behind, and no one could defy death.

"Popova's been studying them to stop the dead from entering homes in Lowtown."

The rumors I'd heard reshaped. "She's a sigil crafter?"

"Don't tell anyone. I think she likes me, but that won't stop her if she learns I revealed her most precious secret." Lumi winked, taking the sting from her words and, just a little, we were as we had been.

My swirling belly settled. Finally, she was sharing her secrets.

The Witch of Lowtown a sigil crafter working outside the Guild. So much made sense. Sigils could create weaker but independent versions of most other magic. Mariska had explained how each sigil carried the will of the mage, the swirling shape steering its flow. Popova must draw them somewhere on the potions bottles where no one could see them.

"If the Guild finds out, they'll come for her," I mused.

Lumi nodded. "And kill her, for she'll never work for them."

I had lived on the shore of a sea of secrets, never looking beyond my world of music and dance, listening and moving to the city around me without thought. Perhaps Morovara had been right. I had to separate myself from my magic, for it had always been there. Even now, talking to my twin whom I had searched desperately for, the joys and sorrows of others, the bats and cats, the horses' complaints of the heat all sang to me.

Mentally, I rebuilt my wall, leaving only the narrowest of holes to connect me to Lumi—enough to tell me she was alive. She was somehow blocking the rest again anyway, and I needed to focus on the present. Needed to convince her we should work together. All of us.

"Dimitri says food and people are missing. They're somehow entering Tal, and no one knows where they go. The Spirit of Lowtown is everywhere. It's somehow all connected."

Like distant notes, separate parts of a symphony I could not fully hear.

Lumi's face closed again at the mention of the prince, her suspicion a jagged note. "And everything has to do with the palace. He's not the answer, but part of the problem."

"Meet with him once, for me. Let's share what we know. *Please*."

I held back my plan for connecting the palace with Morovara and Popova—she would think me bat-bitten if she knew I wanted everyone to work together. One step at a time.

Lumi's fingers clenched around the letter. "Have you shown this to him?"

I shook my head, and again, thoughts moved behind her eyes like sharp-clawed griffons circling their prey.

"Don't tell him anything before we meet, including who I am, and I'll do it."

"Who should I even say he's meeting then?"

"A representative of the Free Tal. Or, as he would say, a rebel—if you prefer."

My own anger at her snapped. "You lied to me, hid everything, and now you want me to convince the crown prince—who doesn't trust me—to meet with a nameless rebel? How?"

"That's up to you. Or we don't meet. I'll wait on the Dragon Bridge at midnight in ten days. Come or don't." She raised her hand with the letter. "I'll keep this until then."

When she walked into Popova's house, I did not follow.

It had been worse and better to see my twin than I had imagined. At least we were no longer tiptoeing around each other. Our old closeness had been gone for years; we had only not wanted to acknowledge it. Somehow, our desire to protect each other had broken the thing we sought to preserve.

Perhaps after the Day of the Dead, we could get to know each other again—not as the twins who were once one person, or the girls on the outside of society, but women, both fighting for the life they wanted.

I imagined her and Dimitri talking, us coming up with a plan together and stopping von Lemerch. Sure, they would fight. Might hate each other at first. But I knew both. They wanted to do what was right for Tal. I needed to make them see that working together—even a temporary truce—was the key. That we were the sheep bringing down the wolf.

Hope squiggled inside me. Tonight, I would regain another piece of Dimitri's trust. In ten days, he would know it all.

Vanya

When I arrived, the Drunken Dead's regular patrons abandoned our back corner table without comment, a worn set of King's Conquest already waiting and tea arriving before I could order. *The privileges of working for the Crown*, the drink hall's owner said when I first asked. I searched for Dimitri, longing for that involuntary curl of his lips as our eyes first met.

Some of the men rewarded my searching gaze with their own smirks. I wanted none of it. Not that male attention had ever been a high priority, but since meeting the prince, they hardly registered.

My heart sank as no mismatched eyes found mine. But he would come. I could wait.

It was the seventh night of looking for answers since I found my sister, seventh time meeting Dimitri as if he was any other man. There were no repeats of the act on the Sinking Spoon, but despite my betrayals and me sometimes seeing the killer in his smooth movements, we had relaxed more in each other's presence each night.

We had finally questioned guards at North Gate, walked among Gateways warehouses, and visited the night market, where I led him to the stands accepting stolen goods as payment. I had betrayed every thief's and rebel's rule and found I did not care. I wanted neither of those roles.

Walking through Tal and feeling the magic around me, I had noticed he, Lumi, and Morovara were not the only ones who could block me out. Most of the walled minds were nobles, but sometimes a merchant or laborer would turn my way, our eyes meet, and we would both know. Magic was not as dead in Tal as Inessa and the Book of Bloodlines believed. Somehow others like me had survived, perhaps trained by family or having figured it out themselves.

Each afternoon before meeting the prince, I had spied on von Lemerch and only learned she had no guests, rarely left the house, and if so only on official business, such as visiting the courthouse. Stakeouts were never fun, but observing the potentially undead last divine ruler of Tal was the most boring one I could remember. I thought about steering Dimitri's and my path past 9th Street and von Lemerch's manor, but the chance of recognition combined with being unable to explain myself, stopped me each time.

As the sun finally set outside, anticipation hurried my steps. Dimitri and I met at the Drunken Dead to share what we knew and plan the night. Sometimes, he only had a few bells to spare, but every night, he came. Two days ago, the patrons chased away from our hidden nook had forgotten to return their game pieces, and while talking we continued the game the old drunks started.

I played white, Dimitri black, but I no longer saw myself as the hunted one. Instead, I saw von Lemerch—*No.Ealhswip*—stand against Herebov, and knew the game played for Tal had never ended. The dead walked our streets in more ways than one.

My magic whispered of dark walls, and I knew the prince had entered through the back door. Since the barge, the possibility of touch hovered between us, the tension snapping into place as soon as he came close. But more than that, a sense of safety settled around me in his presence. A stupid feeling. None of this was safe. Still. There it was, the tension I always carried inside eased.

This man had defended me, in words and action. He knew who I was, and still he came. Listened to my thoughts.

Our eyes locked. The corner of his lips lifted. Head tilted, as if he could not resist considering every inch of me. Not that I could do any differently when his pants were molded to his calves and the coat, two shades darker than his blue eye, hung open to show a shirt identical to the one I had slipped my hands under in his rooms. The royal tailor did a very fine job indeed.

Tonight, light glinted against Dimitri's onyx buttons, so like the game pieces and the oldest parts of Tal, and I realized we, more than anyone, were the latest rendition of our ancestors' game. His had stolen the city from mine, and I had been sent to steal from him. Had Ealhswip known Lumi and I were her many times removed granddaughters?

Neither of us looked it and nothing in her demeanor had revealed it. And who could have planned for us, her last

descendants, to also be related to Helia? Too improbable for a coincidence, too complicated for a plan—even for an immortal. But perhaps it was proof the gods were not as lost as we thought, and the balance Morovara spoke of was more than a metaphor.

Dimitri, the smile already gone, slipped into the seat next to me. I did not need magic to read the tiredness on his schooled face. He had not told me what was happening in the palace, and I had not pried. Were he and Helia laughing and fighting? Sharing his bed? I only knew the nights he spent with me, alone or shadowed by Yahontov.

"No luck?" I asked as I moved a priestess to challenge his rider.

"The Roja left at the North Gate confirmed that while a lot is smuggled into Tal, there's no trace of the missing herds. Come the Day of the Dead, there might be a very disappointing festival." He studied the board and satisfaction too genuine to hide rose. "Oh Tempest, I'm not falling for it."

He moved another rider forward, forcing me to retreat. Two more moves and he took the priestess, reducing me to my final three. He rubbed his thumb over the smooth wooden figurine and leaned back before meeting my eyes.

"Now you owe me again. Tell me something true."

That was the real game, one of trust and questions, and while I valued the pieces of himself he gave me, I did not mind that he was winning.

Each answer tested Ealhswip's curse, pushing it a hair further as if the edges frayed when my mind wandered, and I focused on my memories instead of what they might reveal.

The figurine spun between Dimitri's dexterous fingers, and I remembered them undressing me. Them sliding down, slowing until I wanted to scream. Blushing, I turned away and focused on his question.

"I wanted to be a dancer since I was eight." Instead of the dingy hall, I imagined the warm wood boards below me. "Mother paid for me to join the rich merchants' daughters' classes, for despite her selling her affections, being a bastard, and not even knowing the name of my father, she knew I wasn't less than anyone—no matter what they might have said."

Anger at my long-ago troubles flashed in Dimitri's eyes. "I can't imagine that was easy."

I smiled ruefully. "Children aren't nice. Neither are adults when they don't know what box to put you in. The writing and reading were torture, the embroidery worse. I love music but you wouldn't ever want to hear me play it. But dancing…"

"It was different?"

Somehow, we had moved closer, and the drinks emptied. We should be on our way. Usually, I offered a short answer but I saw my own childhood longing reflected in Dimitri's eyes and wanted to keep it there, amazed that my memories could bring the crown prince to life.

"I was always short and slight, 'barely there' the others would say, then Sky—she was our third teacher—took one look at me and declared I was made to fly. I had always loved moving, but she allowed me to stay late, showed me the spins and how to extend my limbs, how movement could be art and my body could do more than I had ever thought. She made me beautiful."

"She didn't." His voice lowered. "The beauty is all yours."

Dimitri was somehow even closer, our sides pressing against each other, the careful distance we'd kept disappearing. His knuckle brushed an errant lock from my cheek, our skin barely touching.

He snatched his hand back, like a child who reached for a sweet he knew he could not have, and I wished I'd caught it before the distance returned. But I did not. Instead, his words spun inside me, awakening each part.

He thought me beautiful.

Not that he had hid his attraction in the palace, but then he had thought me a princess, had seen me in the finest dresses and jewels. My cheeks heated, remembering creasing the dresses in his bed.

"You really do look remarkably similar to her," he said, throwing ice water onto my longing. There was only one woman he could mean.

I had been compared to Lumi my whole life and not minded. But not Helia, his betrothed. He found me beautiful the first time we met because he mistook me for her—thought me royal and refined. The fake noble's sigil hidden under my coat sleeve burned with lies and embarrassment.

I slammed my next priestess down, hunting his riders, as angry with myself as I was with him. We had a joined purpose, I had a personal one, and neither was romance. "What are the plans for tonight?"

"More questions as we have no leads." He moved his rider across the game board. If he minded me redirecting the conversation, he did not show it.

I considered taking him to von Lemerch's again, but what would that help if there was nothing to see? Three days and then I would have to bring him to meet Lumi. To have gained his trust.

While spying on von Lemerch last night, I'd turned Morovara's words over in my mind. The cult she claimed worked with von Lemerch, who must be Ealhswip no matter what Lumi thought. They needed the Spirits of the dead for something, and the plague proved they were not content to let them die on their own.

"We could check the Archive for the Temple's death tolls," I suggested. "With the plague and immigrants, it should be higher than ever."

"And?"

I licked my lips, unsure how much I could say. *These are Morovara's secrets*, I told the magic, *not von Lemerch's. My own guesses and conjectures.* "The undead we saw… The death carriers should take the corpses to the temple for them to sing the Spirits to peace, right? But instead, the dead walk. They must get the bodies somewhere."

"The death carriers report each corpse they deliver to the temple, who signs before they're paid—if the numbers are down, the priestesses are hiding something." Dimitri narrowed his eyes in thought. "Only the plague victims are taken to the Ramparts instead of the temple. The risk of infection is too high to prepare them inside the city walls."

"Unless someone is interfering with the bodies, and they don't go where they're supposed to. People talk of more Spirits than ever before. There should not be a decline in corpses from any neighborhood—but if the numbers in the Archive said there was..." I shrugged. "Perhaps there are tallies for each death carrier. We could follow them and the bodies."

Hopefully one would lead us directly to von Lemerch's door. From the twist of his mouth, he seemed more willing to blame my great-grandmother and the Temple.

"Thinking like a Roja now." He smiled before giving the game board a final look. Five black against two white priestesses and one Goddess. Our round was almost over. "You could have taken that one."

He pointed at the black rider I had pursued.

I shrugged. "Didn't see it."

But I had. The truths I wanted from him burned on my tongue. *Did you love me? Could you now? Do you love* her?

With a course decided for the night, we left the game unfinished—he would clearly win, for only one of my pieces remained. Perhaps, we both wanted to extend it, afraid of the truths we might expose.

I left on his arm, knowing I could not let myself get any closer without falling all the way. Whatever tangled mess we had, it was good for neither and had no future.

We stayed on the main streets for each day made Tal wilder, as if the pressing summer heat drove the citizens and visitors further into passion, violence, and fear. On street corners below bloody stick figures, men and women stood on boxes and chairs, calling for justice, blaming the plague on the Goddess's wrath, and called out the presumed sins of the man next to me. City guards patrolled, heckled, and hurried. Like Lumi told me at the start of summer, we outnumbered them, and for the first time, they seemed to feel it. Dimitri passed without comment, taking in the calls to bring down the royals under the wide-brimmed hat, muscles tensing under my fingers.

Popova's water was boiling. Tal was ready to erupt. At least we did not come across another riot.

While fewer than feared had sickened with the plague, the death carriers came each dawn, filling their carriage all the same. Those bodies, like my mother's, had only passed by the temples before arriving at the pyre to the south of the city. Downstream, the Taliell must run black, carrying away the ashes of the dead.

I, and now Lumi, alone knew it was a poison and not an illness, and I did not think von Lemerch would be satisfied with the fear around me. More death was coming, and the questions were still too many: Why did she kill so many? How did she deliver the poison? What were Popova and Lumi not telling me?

Sweat stuck my hair to my neck when we arrived at 15 Crown Street and the black-stone Archive—another building which had been a temple before divine rulings were replaced by bureaucracy. Newer houses had grown on both sides, transforming the street into a wall of stores and meeting halls with apartments on top. Behind, more houses mixed with trees, ending at the palace wall. I knew Upper Midtown—pressed between the markets and the palace—well. Lumi and I grew up a block from here, in the attic apartment of a yellow house with yellow roses and loving care we had not known since.

Rich merchants' daughters and lower nobles passed, fine carriages took traders from their meetings, and well-to-do foreigners claimed their own halls, filling the air with the tongues of Kope and Sorach, a garbled version of our own.

This time, I was the one who felt like I did not belong. I had never belonged here, but once, I had pretended, blended, and dreamed.

While several side-eyed the well-dressed Dimitri leading a woman in men's clothes too hot for the season, no one questioned us as we entered the stone arch of the Archive, as part of its collection was open to all citizens.

To protect the papers from the humidity, many of the documents were kept in the cavernous rooms below ground. In Rivertown and Lowtown, no one risked basements due to the spring floods, but this close to the palace we were on the toes of the mountains, above the river and on solid stone.

This was where Lumi imagined herself when closing off her magic. This place of knowledge was her safe space. *How often had she come here without me knowing? What had she been looking for?*

An archivist in training, androgynous and silent, stood in each room to guide and ensure no visitors forged or destroyed the information they guarded. They directed us to the second chamber one level down. A skull above the open arch confirmed this was the records of death. The swirly old writing, similar to the sigils, wrapped around its jaw.

"What does it say?" I whispered, the moving air, like an exhalation, cooling my heated skin.

Dimitri leaned closer, as if he also felt the dead's eyes on us. "Enter the Goddess's Gate, move forward but never return."

I shivered. Ealhswip had returned and no one moved forward. In Tal, they all stayed, the pressure rising, rising, rising. If

Morovara was right, it could not continue.

Despite my determination to keep my distance, I pressed against Dimitri, letting his heat protect me. We entered a spacious stone room illuminated by glassed-in sconces. Three of the four walls were lined with shelved tomes, each one a record of death. Low tables surrounded by reed sitting carpets sat in the middle. No matter how we lived, in the end we would all become an entry here.

An archivist cleared their throat, startling us both, as they stepped from the final wall—a tunnel leading further in.

"What do you seek?" they asked with a voice no louder than rustling pages.

Dimitri, used to commanding those around him and never showing discomfort, recovered before me. "We need the numbers of dead this year from the Temple, and a comparison to previous years."

The archivist bowed and slid to the wall by the door. "Deaths per neighborhoods and day are copied into these books." They moved to the left where white tomes the width of my hand stood, golden figures numbering them. They pulled out the last three, seeming unbothered by the weight. "On the Day of the Dead, the year's tally is entered into the death records. Each book covers three years."

They left them on the closest table and when we did not request anything more, shrank back into the shadows, easy to forget but always watching.

Dimitri looked at me. I shrugged in response and pulled out two of the slimmer volumes. He took three more, and we settled at the table.

While we read, he explained the numbers and columns to me—how the Crown paid the special corpse carriers who took the diseased a fixed daily rate instead of per body like the Temple did for all other deaths. It was supposed to prevent those still alive from being taken, for no one inspected the victims before they were given to the flames—rich or poor, even mages, were not exempt from the plague protocols.

This was a separate line of nameless, causeless death grouped by day next to the Temple's neat numbers. I wanted to retrieve the records of five years ago, but nothing would distinguish my mother's line.

In silence, we both sank into memories and numbers, searching for something that did not fit—a pattern, a gap. The thing I could point at and say, *See, let's just follow the dead from there.*

Studying was Lumi's strength, not mine, and after staring myself blind at the meticulously recorded numbers and names, Dimitri squeezed my knee.

I blinked in the low light. "What?"

"The tapping." His lips curved in a slight grin. "I don't think this is the place for music."

"I wasn't—"

The archivist's snort made me swallow my denials.

Dimitri released me. "You don't sit still for long, do you?"

"Not if I can help it." I laughed quietly. "And this place wracks my nerves." It was not just the cold seeping into me through the thin mats, but the silence. My magic was muffled, like when I built a wall around myself. *Hadn't Lumi said something similar about where she and Helia had been kept?*

"Did you find anything?" Dimitri asked, seeming to recognize the change in me. This place was too familiar.

Distracted, I rose. "Not about the dead. Except that too few have a name. You?"

I walked toward the archivist standing in the half-illuminated tunnel as I spoke.

Dimitri sighed. "Nothing stands out. We would have to tally the dead of this year as it is almost over. I'll send someone to continue." I heard his closing steps behind me. "What are you doing?"

I was halfway into the tunnel when the archivist blocked my path, their expression firm.

"Apologies. This part is restricted."

I took another step, straining my neck to see into the darkness. "How far does the tunnel go?"

They only shook their head.

"Are there floor plans?"

"Apologies. Those are also restricted."

Dimitri stepped up behind me. "What are you looking for, Tempest?"

Von Lemerch hardly left her manor. I had not seen the priestesses she met with under the Tower again. Despite Dimitri telling me all gate guards had been questioned, there was no trace of the food entering Tal. And through the gate, they could have driven livestock. Why slaughter them in the countryside?

The Archive—the oldest building on the street, black and ancient—looked like the Women's Tower, like Morovara's ziggurat and the subterranean abandoned temple where Helia had been kept. It affected magic. The final thing they all had in common was tunnels.

Visiting Morovara, I had gone only up, but everyone knew they prepared the dead below ground. Under the Women's Tower, I had gone from the treasury to the crypt and seen many branching paths.

I spun to Dimitri, his face inches from mine. "This is how they do it! How the food—*tunnels*—"

Invisible hands crushed my windpipe. Pressed the air from my lungs.

The scream I could not push out roared inside me as I fell to my hands and knees. Black closed in.

Air.

I opened and closed my mouth in vain, like a fish continuing what always worked before.

Dimitri pressed his hands to my cheeks, mouth moving. I could not hear his words through my panic.

She had said I would choke if I told secrets. And I had. Or believed I had.

I won't say anything more. Please. I didn't mean it. Please.

I won't I won't I won't I won't—

Desperate tears streamed down my cheeks as I collapsed on my side. I did not want to die. This could not be it—I reached for Lumi, needing my other half, finding nothing.

Someone shook my struggling body.

Someone shouted for help.

Someone held me as if I mattered as the world slipped away.

Dimitri

The pristine curved white walls framed the blue sky outside, making the red coats stand out like the life blood they represented.

"She's not hurt," Mariska said again. "Not physically."

I paced the narrow space outside my cousin's tiny room. I had not slept for more than a day. Each time I closed my eyes, the panic returned.

"She is hurt every time I turn around." I knew Tempest—Vanya—was strong. But still… "How can I protect her?"

"It's up to her to protect herself." Mariska stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "I lied about her name on the records, but if someone recognizes her. Protect her by not drawing your father's attention."

I knew she was right, but when Vanya fell unconscious in my arms, her lips turning blue and eyes empty, I had rushed her to the hospital, ignoring the consequences. The realization that she might die, destroying our chance to really know each other, to see where this might lead no matter how irrational, had burrowed into my mind and now the panic refused to leave. I had ignored how my heart lightened every night I arrived at the Drunken Dead and knew she was safe.

With her seemingly dead in my arms this night, it could no longer be ignored. Goddess help me, I could not let her go.

"Did you know who she was?" I asked my cousin, the last person I trusted.

Her hesitation was enough for me to resume my angry pacing.

"You did. And so did Eki. Only I was too blind to see it."

"Eki?" Mariska's surprise sounded genuine enough.

Anger and grief and old tenderness awoke as I thought of my previous friend and lover. Once, I trusted her as well. "She pushed 'the princess' from the balcony during worship. And she still insists we must marry. What happened while I was away?"

"She did what?" Mariska rubbed her face in exasperation.

"Tried to kill my bride. The woman I thought was my bride. Who knows what Eki thought. Goddess, what a mess."

I also grieved for our son, but not like that. Revenge was one thing, hurting anyone in your way another.

Mariska avoided my eyes, same as she had when I asked about Vanya.

I paused, remembering Eki saying she had something she needed to tell me and Mariska knowing what it was. "What's Ekatarina hiding?"

"She made me swear. She'll tell you. I'll talk to her. You should go to her."

My cousin rambling when put on the spot used to be cute. When excited, Alexei would tease her until she could not find the words. I found it, like so much else, had lost its attraction. In her red healer's coat and hair pinned into a bun, she no longer seemed the cheerful girl I had left behind.

Talking to Eki was the last thing I wanted. I should have had her arrested or committed, but with Vanya replaced by Helia, I did not dare bring attention to what had happened. Not that I would humor Ekatarina's delusions again. We were done.

"It has nothing to do with this." Mariska stepped closer and stared up with eyes shaped just like mine. "I like Vanya and I think you do too. You deserve happiness. Don't marry Helia if it means giving it up."

"You talk as if I have a choice?" I looked at the white door. Behind it, the woman who consumed my thoughts rested. "There is only one way this ends."

Mariska scoffed. "Then keep her out of your machinations until you're sure what you want, until whatever you plan is over. I don't know her, not really, but I think she's seen enough suffering. She's still learning her magic. If she overuses it again, no one can predict the consequences. And what happened last night… I think it's the curse the water seer felt. Whatever you were doing triggered it."

The terror threatened to rise again. “Any idea how to break it?”

“I’m a healer, no seer. The only sure way to break curses isn’t one we prescribe.”

Death.

I shuddered, thinking where she had collapsed. Despite sigils blocking the Spirits from the City Archive, death had surrounded us. Her last words meant she realized something important.

I needed to find the food and not only because my father ordered me to. Each day I spent searching, I saw the gaunt faces of street children, the abandoned toys, and burned skulls on the farmstead. Each day, my scouts found more deserted ones. The Day of the Dead was coming. The citizens of Tal expected a royal banquet open to all. Expected the fall markets to fill their bellies until spring. I needed to solve it, or complaints would transform into bloodshed.

Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door. Urgently, I lowered my voice and focused on my cousin.

“When I can, I’ll protect her. When I can keep her away from danger, I will.”

Mariska’s serious face, so at odds with the charming child we had used as a decoy during pranks, lent weight to the words. Like sigils they wrote themselves on my insides. Like wedding vows, exchanged between the couple and no one else—private and sacred.

The door opened, Tempest with wild hair and sleepy eyes but otherwise as magnificent and enticing as I had come to expect her, looked from my cousin to me, her expression fierce enough that I thought she might have overheard.

“I’m done resting. I’m fine.” She said it as if expecting a challenge.

I looked to Mariska for assurances. “Is she—”

“I promised to stay for three bells. You can’t keep me.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “How can you be here? Surely someone at the palace is missing the crown prince by now?”

“You thought I was leaving before I knew you were well? After you choked on air? Does that happen often?”

“I’ve answered all Riska’s questions. She’s the healer.”

I swallowed the fear before she could see it in my eyes. From the first moment I spun her around in the palace forest, I had been unable to keep my composure, the blank court mask slipping until I could no longer find it.

Pulling my fingers through my free-for-once hair—a benefit of the disguise—I turned back to my cousin.

“Well?”

Mariska smiled from ear to ear. “You’re so cute together. All fire and—” She laughed at my no doubt frustrated expression. “As I told you, she’s healthy. I treat illnesses, and this is something else. She knows what to do.” Mariska turned her perceptive eyes on Vanya. “And what *not* to do.”

“I’ll be more careful,” Tempest said to the woman who had become her friend despite lies and pretense.

Neither had a reason to pretend to like each other anymore. If their relationship had been genuine, perhaps some of the feelings my princess expressed toward me had as well. And so had the lingering looks and too brief touches at the Drunken Dead.

Vanya squirmed under my searching eyes. What had the curse prevented her from saying? How could I even guess what was going on in her head? I could not push her anymore. Not when the result might be death. No matter what lies she’d told, the conspiracy she’d been part of, I cared too much. On the river barge, I’d struggled not to stab Heridan for looking at her. If speaking risked her life, I regretted each time I demanded answers.

“I need a moment with Mariska,” Tempest said carefully, as if checking what my reaction would be.

Not long ago, I would have insisted on being present to protect my innocent cousin from her trickery, now I simply nodded.

The relief washing over her face was a balm on my torn nerves. If she could smile like that, she truly was fine.

“Perhaps it’s best no one sees us together,” she continued. “If I’m alone no one would look twice but I imagine many know you. We both have places we should be, people to meet…”

She was sending me away. Something I had not even considered before struck me, jealousy souring my mouth. Perhaps she had someone waiting. Someone who knew the true her. Someone she could speak to without nearly dying. How could she make me so sure and insecure in the same moment?

She’d stayed in Tal to help, and here I was swearing secret vows to protect her, as if she was mine. I could not afford to forget myself. There was too much at stake to dream of lingering looks.

She had shown me how wonderful she was—kind and brave, free but somehow fragile. When I caught her, she fought with elbows and smiles, when we played and strategized a brilliant mind, creative and sure, shone through. Not like a scholar or general, but artist and inventor making the mundane seem new. She moved as if each step was the start of a dance. Despite how life had beaten her down, she seemed not even away how jaded it would have made most. She bent and never broke. She was someone I had not even known to wish for.

She deserved better than all this—me and whoever cursed her, pulling her into danger and plots. I’d just promised to protect her. Could I be honorable enough to let her go?

I stepped back, bowing like I would have to the Oberwaldian princess. “I’ll leave you to it then. Your debt to me is paid—if there ever was one.”

I spun on my heel and escaped into the empty stairway, desperate to run from emotions tearing apart the little ice still inside me. *Alone again*, a deceptive voice that sounded like my father whispered. *A king is always alone.*

A life I did not want. Was revenge worth—

A small hand closed around my arm, the grip light enough for me to walk away. A solid handhold in the storm inside me.

Tempest pressed against my back. "You don't get rid of me that easily. Meet me on Third Street, North's Place at eighth bell tomorrow."

"Why?" It came out louder than I intended. The lone word echoing up and down the white staircase. "I won't force or guilt or blackmail you."

She lightly turned me around. "You don't have to. I told you; I want to help. This can't be goodbye… there are things I can't tell you, but perhaps I can show you."

Deep in her emerald eyes swam flecks of gold, brilliant in the sunlight streaming in through the tall windows.

"What do you really want? Why do you wait every night?" I asked. "Tell me that at least."

"*You*. I want you and am unable to walk away."

She stared up at me, like she had at the drinking hall when I thought, maybe, we could still… I had moved away. It had been the right thing to do. To deny the pull she had on me from the start. Proper. Sensible. Impossible.

You.

Not a crown or contract.

You.

Not prestige or promises.

When I pulled her close, when she tilted her head and wetted her lips, when I allowed myself to taste them again, my tongue flitting against hers, I thought of no one else. Nothing else.

Rightness replaced confusion and doubt as our tongues tangled. One taste could never be enough.

I had convinced myself it would not be the same when I knew who she truly was. That it'd been the act which drew me in, and she had felt like mine only because of the marriage contract. That I had fallen for someone who never existed.

Lies.

The woman in my arms remained everything I desired. More, considering what she had overcome. And at least while our lips caressed, our hands clung, and our breaths caught, she was mine.

"Your Highness," a gruff voice said in my ear, and I spun, pushing Tempest behind me.

A pair of healers deep in conversation had passed while we kissed, but neither paid us any attention. No, the man before me seemed to be a shadow hard to shake.

"Yahontov. I was just about to return to the palace."

He grunted. Despite standing on a lower step, we were the same height.

Without letting him out of my sight, I waved Vanya back toward Mariska's room. Yahontov had probably already recognized her. He might not go directly to my father, but he was Roja and even Alexei had said their loyalty to the royal spymaster went beyond who sat on the throne and what other promises they gave. The question was, *what would von Uster do with this information?*

"Third Street, North's Place," Vanya whispered behind me before the door closed.

I started down the stairs, forcing Yahontov to follow, hoping removing him from her could protect her.

"How did you find me?"

He shrugged again. Probably someone had recognized me. Probably more people than I could guess reported to the Roja. A chilling thought.

The princely mask slid back in place. "I'm going to the palace."

To review the night's reports and find some sleep. And figure out the one word she had been able to utter. *Tunnels*.

We stepped out into the sun and Tal's empty streets. The brisk pace until the palace walls prohibited conversations. As I slowed to get through the gate without being recognized, Yahontov let out a grunt sounding suspiciously like a laugh.

"What?"

He stepped between me and a delivery carriage, as if to protect me even from a skittish horse.

"I didn't interrupt you for nothing." This time the laugh was clear. "Another princess waits in your chambers."

I did not bother correcting him or confront his knowledge of Vanya. It was a conversation that would need to wait.

I ducked below the rim of the carriage and sped my steps, damning whoever had let Helia into my rooms. Did no one respect a locked door?

On the short walk across the courtyard and up to the seventh floor, I did not initiate any more conversation, and of course, Yahontov said nothing, though I could feel his mirth as if I was an empath instead of wind whisperer.

Finally at my floor with too-tired eyes and in common clothes, I took a deep breath, then slunk into my own chamber like a thief, closing the door in Yahontov's face after ordering him to make himself useful and bring me anything he could find on tunnels in Tal. He might be able to track me everywhere, but this was one place he had to obey. It was not like the Oberwaldian

princess planned to kill me. Though I had accused Tempest of the same not long ago—without me, there would be no marriage contract. Perhaps Helia had found a loophole or convinced my grandmother to abandon her superstitions—perhaps the sun would rise in the west.

The true princess turned, pale-gray dress wrapping around her and spectacles sliding down as she took me in. Her mouth slammed shut, and I wondered if I should also spin to give her the full experience. Had she been Tempest, I might have. Instead, I threw the hat on my desk, discarded my coat, and rolled up my sleeves, relieved to remove one layer as the heat of the day reached even up here.

Helia looked me up and down without the teasing of her impostor. "Seems you're more interesting than I assumed."

"And you're in my rooms. If you are concerned about propriety, you can wait outside."

She waved her hand dismissively and settled on the sofa. "Do what you must. We need to talk, and you've been avoiding me."

"I've been busy." *And avoiding her.* Every time I looked at her, I saw another, compared her to *my* princess, and then cursed myself. But with the kiss fresh on my lips, their differences stood out—the slightly upturned nose, the rounder shape, the tighter curls. Even more was the way they carried themselves. Vanya danced and flew while Helia had both feet securely planted on the ground.

I entered my bedchamber and changed, leaving the door open so we could talk. After this night, and too many others, I no longer had the energy for decency. Helia clearly did not care.

"Have you convinced Solovyova to argue against the marriage?" I called as I pulled a clean shirt on.

Helia scoffed. "She seems convinced our union will save magic and life and Tal itself. I knew the City of Bones and Roses was old-fashioned, but this exceeds even my low views. How can this be the hub of trade and still be so stuck in time? Perhaps it's fitting that the most advanced machine I've seen was a clock."

"Solovyova stands by tradition," I said, feeling the need to defend my grandmother despite agreeing with Helia.

"You can't change the past, why cling to it?"

I stepped back out into the sitting room in my own black outfit, comfortable despite the stiff fabrics. "Any other possibilities?"

There was hope in my voice and I had to remind myself I wanted this marriage to go ahead. It was the only way to get free of my father, to enact my revenge and leave Tal behind. I did not want to break the contract… But could there be another way I had not considered?

Helia gave me a narrow-eyed look, as if she felt my internal turmoil. "I've read it backwards and forwards—the first-born Princess of Oberwalden, presuming she is not the royal heir, will marry the Crown Prince of Tal. Trade rights in the addendum will be given when the marriage is legal. If either side breaks it, they will forfeit the other nation's gifts while still uphold their side, unless either side is found unfitting."

"I know the terms." I sighed and settled in the chair opposite her. "And are you unfitting?"

I had almost been—if the marriage to Eki had been final, if our child had lived, Oberwalden could have claimed a breach. My father had ensured that possibility never manifested.

Helia raised her hand, counting off the conditions on her fingers. "I am the first-born princess but my older brother is the heir, and killing him to escape an unwanted marriage seems extreme; the seer confirmed my magic strong enough to fulfill your grandmother's superstitions, and at least the healer was quick in checking there are no reasons I should be unable to bear an heir of my own"—from her disgusted frown, this was nothing she remotely desired—"and my education is considered adequate. Short of you marrying my aunt, I've found no solutions."

"Flora von Heskin?" I almost choked on my own tongue. "Who you requested I lock in Tal's prison?"

"She fulfills all of the requirements."

"She can have children still?" *Why was I even debating this?*

Helia's smile widened. "Perhaps not, but I never intended to participate in that part even if the marriage went through as planned, so really it wouldn't change anything. You're not my taste."

"Not your taste?" I could hardly claim the same, considering how similar her looks were to Vanya's, but the instant attraction, the push and pull, was nowhere between me and Helia.

She pointedly let her gaze travel from my boots to my no doubt scruffy chin. "A man."

"Ah." I processed it, rearranging what I knew of her. If she was not promised to be Queen of Tal, no one might have cared. With the marriage contract and the penalties attached, it made sense she had stayed out of the spotlight. "How long have you known?"

"That I like women?" Her face softened. "Always, or at least since I kissed Lorelei, a minor noble I grew up with, at eleven."

"We don't need to—" I waved a hand between us. "—even if we get married. By then, no one can force us to do anything."

She nodded. "You're a better man than I thought. If it gets that far, I planned to retire to a country estate for a season and return with another woman's child—yours if you demand it. There are many who need a home. Why not make one of them the

next ruler?"

For the first time, Helia seemed insecure, like she had not planned to tell me this. Some would call it treason. I did not care. Seeing one child burn had been enough, I had no desire for more. It only invited pain.

"You know I can't marry your aunt. She most likely conspired against Tal. I might not care much for ruling, but I'll not do more harm by giving someone like her power."

Helia laughed, breaking the somber mood. "I never thought you'd consider it. Flora can rot where she is. She knew what I wanted and betrayed me."

And she knew who was behind Tempest's curse. Behind it all. So far, she was not talking though.

I studied Helia and remembered the kiss in the hospital. Remembered Alexei roaring his defiance at my side as the fire came closer. Despite knowing he had no magic, that none of his many skills meant anything against the flames, he had fought. When I returned to Tal, I only desired vengeance. For three years, the events of one night had twisted my insides, frozen the softness and care I believed led to the tragedy.

Tal needed stability—that meant a wedding and a ruler who did not run despite having no skills to fight the fires, like Alexei had. Undead walked and perhaps Solovyova's beliefs held a kernel of truth. I needed to be free of my father, now more than ever, because inside me lived a new hope, feelings I knew I should cover with the familiar ice rather than let grow.

"What if we did not *really* marry?" I said.

Helia raised an eyebrow behind the thick glasses. "Of course. Why didn't I think of that? Just breach a binding contract, contradict our Heads of House, defy the rules of magic—"

"After the ceremony and coronation. Then we defy the rules."

She blinked at me, which I took as encouragement, speaking while my plan formed. It would never have worked without a bride as willing to lie as I.

"A marriage, in its simplest form, is a vow before the Goddess, a vow to each other," I continued, voicing thoughts I once would have dismissed out of hand. "And in Tal you also vow to protect the city and the Spirits on behalf of the Goddess. Tradition states, we say them alone in the crypt. What if we wear the crowns but only say the second part of the vow—the one Solovyova insists on is needed to protect Tal—and leave the love and commitment to each other out? Who would know?"

Only two bells ago, I promised Mariska to protect Vanya. This was the same in reverse—one vow for Tal, one for love. Both precarious. Perhaps together, there was a sliver of a possibility to find the future I barely dared to dream of.

I could see Helia turning it around in her head. At least she did not reject it outright.

"They'll still mark me as queen," she said. "And we'll still be tied together."

I nodded. Me becoming king was necessary. I would not live under my father's rule. "But we will be the Heads of House Herebov. You could govern Denyev or Kope, if you want, or retire to a country estate and live as you please, just not too far from Tal. When everything settles down, we'll announce that this is a union but not a marriage sworn to the Goddess. You would be free to wed someone else if you wanted to."

"The contract wouldn't have been fulfilled."

"But your mother is willing to dismiss the penalties if the King of Tal breaks it, and I'll be king after my father believes us married and he places the crown on my head."

"And your father? What will he do when he realizes he's been tricked?"

The familiar hate swirled in me. I knew what I wanted, what I needed, to happen. "I'll be head of our House. He won't be able to do anything."

"What if we go to the crypt but don't say any vows at all?"

"If there's even a chance my grandmother is right… strange things are happening in Tal. When the next ruler is crowned, we'll be released. We only require a suitable heir, and it doesn't have to be a child."

She tapped the armrest, seemingly studying the sketched maps which lined my walls. "What's the effect of the vow?"

I hesitated, then decided it was the truth or nothing. Helia had trusted me, I needed to trust her.

"I'm not sure. My father never left the city or our vassal towns for more than a three-day since he was crowned. While twisted, he desires to protect Tal. Once my mother described it as a compulsion or a curse, she could not knowingly break. She wanted to hurt my father, but as it would hurt Tal, she could not. I don't know if its effect comes from the vow itself or the royal sigil."

The silence stretched between us.

What I proposed not only went against the marriage contract. Crowning someone based on a lie? That was treason. It would tie me to the role and city I longed to escape, to the fate I no longer believed in.

Once, I had not questioned that I was born to rule. Running in the Tower, then training with blades and books, there had never been any other possibilities. During my exile, I swore never to take the crown. Then my father offered me a route to vengeance, and I had still been playing by his rules. Even abdicating was part of the Talian tradition. Courting a Lowtown thief...

"And you could marry as well," Helia said, already reading my face too well for comfort.

"No." I had relaxed my guard, revealed too much. Dreams were made to be crushed.

I rubbed my tired eyes. Perhaps I could see Tempest, create a bond and joint life, but even in my imagination was marriage impossible.

I was ready to block out the sun and sleep despite the reports waiting on my desk. Taking the crown, marriage or no, even more of my time would go to Tal.

Helia gave me a last look. “Remember, every tradition was once new. Fight for her. They told me, Tal’s supposed to be the city of love as well as death.”

Leaving, she ran into two servants about to knock, their arms filled with scrolls and tomes.

After apologies, bowing, and hasty gathering, I was finally alone with everything they had been able to find so quickly on tunnels in my city. Ignoring the call of my bed and the riders’ reports filled with problems I did not know how to solve, I carefully removed my sketches, remnants from my old life, from the walls and pinned up the complex city drawings of sewers, covered roads, and more underground routes than I had ever imagined I walked above.

Examining the aged parchments written in the old script, I was glad for years spent studying cartography as I mentally overlayed the lost buildings with the present Tal.

In my notebook, full of scribbles and thoughts, I drew the old together with the new, connecting former temples and buildings no longer standing, sure that this was what Tempest had meant.

Finally, I was making progress. We would find the food. And after that, with Helia’s cooperation, the world held possibilities each scratch of my stylus seemed to make more real. A life instead of only death. Love and hope.

A happy breeze swirled around me, as if the world itself approved.

Vanya

Waiting on 3rd Street in twilight brought me back. I had come here alone to stalk out the von Mekeln manor when preparing for the theft. Had ignored the dilapidated manor I now focused on until magic led me to realize Lumi and Helia were imprisoned in the basement—not that my sister had really needed my help.

That day had been filled with grief and truths, but I still remembered what I had seen underground.

I tensed at approaching footsteps this time, an irrational part of me fearing my sister would find me and notice the kiss that still clung to my lips. I could not have been more surprised if he had stabbed me. I needed the meeting tomorrow night to go well and could no longer put off telling him. After how he left me at the hospital, I was sure Dimitri would at least listen. He was dangerous, trained to fight and distrust, but he had acted like my protector. In his arms, I only felt safe.

The day's heat pressed down like the Goddess's own hand, reminding me the Day of the Dead rushed closer. If we could not stop Ealhswip before then, she would wait for Dimitri and Helia in the crypt, and neither one would survive to see the first day of fall. Tonight, I would show Dimitri what I knew and tomorrow, Lumi would share the letter and reveal the rest. Together, we would succeed.

I had memorized the faces of those coming and going to the von Lemerch manor, knowing information would be more valuable than gold. With my few remaining coins, I had bought beautiful invitations for Popova, Morovara, and von Paran, the head of the Merchant Guild—the main powers in Tal outside the palace. The crisp paper waited only for Lumi and Dimitri to provide the words. With their planning and me, reading each invitees emotions as I delivered them, convincing them collaboration was needed, there was a chance. Even an undead queen could not stand against all of Tal.

First, Dimitri.

A silhouetted man strode down the street, his confident gait familiar. I stepped forward with the words I'd practiced ready on my tongue only to swallowed them. He had not come alone.

Two more people slid through the night—one small and one large. Only the trust we had established over the previous nights made me stay. He would not arrest me for my lies after the kiss, would he?

With clouds covering the far away stars, I could not read Dimitri's face even when he stopped before me but, with hope, imagined the usual smile wider, the glint in his eye from the barge. His shadows halted close enough to overhear.

He pressed a soft leather-bound book into my hands, his fingers interlacing with mine as he opened it. It was too dark to see anything on the page.

"Tempest, you were right," he said, voice as thick as the summer air.

"About?" I pulled away, taking the book with me. Since I left the hospital, I had imagined his arms around me as we kissed without interruptions. None of the dreams included an unknown audience.

"The tunnels. I never knew Tal had so many," Dimitri continued without noticing my apprehension. "Apparently, some of the ancient priestesses swore to forsake daylight to get closer to the Goddess. They used them to get around Tal." He steered my hand. "Here."

A small mage light sprang up between us. Besides a large man and a small woman in leathers—now illuminated in blue—we were alone. Still, to use magic in the open… I swallowed.

There was no law against it, but it would surely draw attention. No one displayed their powers so recklessly. It made you a threat, and a threat was a target. Blushing, Mariska had told me that among the nobility it was comparable to baring your breasts. Perhaps worse. I had never understood the taboo before I found myself with magic and learned the effects of overuse—at best an addled brain and loss of inhibitions, at worst permanent brain injury, insanity, and death both to you and those around you.

Surely a mage light would not risk anyone's sanity, but it would be seen as soon as someone looked down the street.

I yanked Dimitri into the gate alcove. We stood pressed too close and not close enough, our breaths mixing as I finally looked at the pages in my hand.

Delicate lines I recognized as his covered the paper in blue and green squares and lines. I turned it on its side, trying to read the tiny letters.

"What is it?"

"A map." Pride I had only heard when he talked of Cherny brightened his words. "I know you cannot say more, but you solved it." He pointed at a green square on the top left. "We're here. The blue are major streets and landmarks of today, the green are the abandoned tunnels and exits I could find. This is the Archive."

Lowtown and Rivertown was all blue—the ground around the Taliell too soft and the river arms too numerous for tunnels. My finger hovered over the page, tracing the lines in the air and committing as much as possible to memory. Now that I knew what it was, I recognized the heavy green areas as the Temple District and palace.

I searched for green on 9th Street, where only six blocks away the undead former divine rule's home stood, but there was nothing. Either Ealhswip did not have an entrance to the tunnels, or, more likely, it had not been marked on the old maps Dimitri found.

I swallowed my disappointment—it could have led us to her front door without me saying a word. What he had created was amazing, even if it was not complete.

"It's beautiful," I said and meant it.

He shrugged, but a smile I would once have thought impossible tugged at his lips. "I know a curse prevents you from speaking—and I wouldn't ask you to—but I hoped we could find an entrance together."

"I would like that." And I could steer us east, toward Ealhswip, without revealing anything myself. After almost dying last night, I was more aware than ever of the knife's edge I walked.

Dimitri nodded at the two who had followed him. I recognized the tall shape of Yahontov despite the leather armor and sword sticking up over his shoulder. The smaller woman had a button nose and hair in a high braid. Perhaps without the great bones melded to her arm and leg guards and helmet shaped like the head of a great mountain cat, some would have called her cute. I returned her biting smile when I saw her blood-red boots reflect the light. With one look, she spoke to something fierce and wild inside me. Despite fearing her kind my whole life, I wanted this bone soldier to like me, for standing close to her felt like stepping up to the edge of a great height.

The prince shrugged as his companions stepped fully inside the light. "I would prefer to have come alone," he said, "but even going into Lowtown disguised was—"

"Irresponsible," Yahontov rumbled.

"—risky," Dimitri finished, throwing the large man an annoyed look. "Taking them with us is the compromise. You know Yahontov. This is Koshka, she's a scout with the Bone Guard. Both have sworn on the Goddess, they'll tell no one of our excursion. They know what's at stake."

The sigiled ribs of a large animal attached to the woman's light leather armor would lend her some of the strength and agility of the animal Spirit, or so the stories went. The Roja were the king's spies, the Guard his elite fighters. Koshka was also about half the size of any bone guards I had seen in the palace.

The mage light colored her teeth blue when she flashed a wide grin, as if she was used to disbelieving looks. "I'm usually in the saddle, but don't let my size fool you. I could take down this one with one hand behind my back."

She pointed at Yahontov who grunted in response, though his amusement sang through my magic. Maybe even he was relaxing around me.

I nodded to both, knowing I should have feared them, but liking them despite myself. "Greetings, friend of a friend, I'm…"

I gave Dimitri a questioning look, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

"You're the first princess," Koshka said, giving the prince a long look. "Well, you couldn't have expected us not to notice just because you act like the Oberwaldian has been at the palace this whole time. I have eyes."

"And a mouth," Yahontov finished. This time his feelings matched the disapproval in his voice.

"Perhaps we should be going," I said, not knowing how to respond to Helia apparently sliding into the space I left. "The manor is abandoned. We need to get inside, then…" I pointed to the map.

Dimitri extinguished his mage light, understanding what I left unsaid. He tried the gate, finding it locked. "Is there another way inside?"

"Don't know and don't need one." I grinned. "We go over."

The others stared at me and then the one-floor-high wall.

"Over?" Yahontov said, though he was probably the only one who could reach the top just by stretching. Perhaps he worried the old mortar would not carry his weight.

"Launch me," Koshka commanded, and with no further arguments, she and I went over the wall.

Dimitri and Yahontov followed with significantly more grumblings and scrapes.

When we were all inside, I remained silent for each word could be seen as revealing secrets. Focusing on my desire to show

the house to Dimitri and relaxing my hold on my magic, I asked the world for light.

Tiny mage lights sprang up around us, like fireflies hovering in the air.

With the boarded-up windows and wild garden, no one would see inside to recognize the magic I still could not believe was mine. The others only nodded in thanks, the Roja and Bone Guard probably more comfortable around mages than most. Rumor had it, many of them held secret powers of their own.

Thankfully, there were no Spirits inside this time; I had hardly seen any in the whole neighborhood. It should have calmed me.

The bookshelf was closed again, seemingly identical to all others in the dark. I pointed at the hidden lock, realizing I had no way of opening it. The shadows hid my blush. I should have figured this out before I brought the prince here.

"Through here? I love a secret passage." Koshka's excitement rolled off her in waves as she pressed her hands against the aged wood. "I bet I can figure it out before any of you."

"Or we break it down." Yahontov placed a hand on his great sword as if ready to draw.

Dimitri shook his head. "If you can keep it intact, no one will know we came this way. This is reconnaissance, not an attack."

While Koshka and Yahontov investigated every inch of the bookshelf, I showed the prince the sigils on the floor. Time ticked inside me as if I still heard the clock in the princess's chambers.

"We can go to one of the other entrances on your map instead." I had been excited at showing him this—at figuring it out. I should have known he would take my one word and return with so much more. He could probably order the Archive emptied and the frowning archivists to give us access to all its secrets.

"Thank you for showing me," Dimitri said. "This is more discreet than any still occupied buildings. When we send soldiers inside, that'll be the advantage we need."

He squeezed my hand, callouses from sword fighting brushing against mine earned from climbing. Heat, as if with enough friction we could create fire, spread through my blood.

Wood cracked behind us and Yahontov's satisfaction trilled through me. The night vibrated with excitement.

"The break's barely visible," Yahontov said while Koshka mumbled curses.

It was true. And Ealhswip probably already thought this entrance compromised as Lumi and Helia had escaped from there.

Ignoring their banter, I led the way down the steps, my mage lights illuminating the black stones decorated with images of ancient worship.

Now that I knew who we fought, a new fear wormed its way inside. *Could the Goddess be on the side of her divine ruler? Were we fighting death itself?*

"Have there been more plague victims?" I asked. The fires south of the Lowtown city wall still burned, the smell of crisping flesh tainting the air, but some might have taken advantage of the chaos and gotten rid of rivals with no questions asked. Was Ealhswip still poisoning, or had she already found her targets?

"Nine dead during the last three-day, several of their family members are still ill but seem to be recovering." Dimitri lowered his voice. "All mages. Why do you ask?"

I pointed at my mouth and shook my head, and the sight before us saved me from further questions.

The chamber below was much like I remembered—the rectangular space stretched further than the manor above, only slim pillars and a massive altar breaking the open space. Tomorrow, Dimitri would read the letter himself, and Lumi—seemingly less bound by Ealhswip's magic—could explain the rest.

The others spread out to study the ancient subterranean temple while I imagined my sister staying here voluntarily to spy while I played the princess, thinking they would hurt Lumi for my every infraction. Anger I could not allow if we were to work together fought the fear of what would happen if Ealhswip won.

"Here," Dimitri called.

I followed his voice to a back wall where the Death Goddess's face stared back at me. Any doubt I might have held that this used to be a temple disappeared. It was the same cut jawbones and antlered head I had seen Ealhswip caress in the crypt under the Women's Tower, only smaller. Three priestesses stood around her, their hands reaching to form a triangle closed by rows of sigils.

"According to the map a tunnel should lead this way and I've seen a similar symbol on an ancient door before." He hesitated, his reluctance to speak drifting through the cracks in his mental wall.

"How do you open it?" Koshka asked, tracing the lines in an eerily similar way to Ealhswip.

"Blood—though you must never tell anyone." Dimitri drew his fingers through his hair as if fighting his upbringing. "But who's?"

Koshka drew a knife from her vambrace and sliced her finger before anyone could offer a suggestion. I held my breath as she pressed her bloodied thumb against the Goddess's face only to release it with a shrug when nothing happened.

"Not mine, I guess."

She held up the knife as if offering it to the Goddess for direction.

It was Dimitri's city, but this temple, these sigils, were presumably from before Herebov's time.

I snatched the knife from Koshka's hand and stung my thumb like I had so many times in the Grove, offering my blood for the care of my mother's Spirit. Then, I had not known it connected me to the high priestess and those who came before her, all the way back to Ealhswip. If bloodlines carried power, mine held more than I ever would have believed.

I covered Koshka's fingerprint with my own, the blood appearing black under the blue mage lights.

An invisible hook caught my magic, a presence like the crown's but smaller, tasting me before letting go.

I staggered into Dimitri's arms as, with a low rumbling and creaking gears, the wall moved on metal rails. Koshka donned her helmet, great teeth framing her face, and Yahontov half drew his sword.

The rumbling stopped, and the open door revealed a pitch-black tunnel. Nothing moved on the other side. Yahontov let his blade go after leaning inside as if to confirm nothing lurked.

The prince clutched me tight as everyone's eyes burned my scalp, demanding answers. I wanted to stay in the secure warmth that reminded me of the best night's sleep I could remember. But then I had led him on, traded kisses and wishes, while Tal burned. No matter where we went from here, what the kiss had meant, I needed to stand on my own. In the meeting tomorrow, we would become true partners in this.

Stepping into the empty dark, I pulled him along with me.

"Tempest?" he asked with a hesitation I did not recognize. "Perhaps you should stay back. This isn't safe."

"Then you're the one who should not come." I shook my head at anyone valuing the life of a thief over the crown prince's. "I'm no princess."

"But the only one who lay unconscious last night and is currently unarmed."

He followed despite his arguments.

I had wanted his trust. Now I had to deliver. Tonight, we were finding the food. Tonight, I would prove I could make a difference.

Walking in a line, I led them into the darkness, trying to steer us toward Ealhswip.

Two and a half bells later in seemingly abandoned tunnels, we did not register the first scrape. Only when the sound came again, louder and closer, did I extinguish the mage light. We stopped, tensing, listening, in the absolute dark.

A bell ago, Dimitri had taken the lead, guiding us using the map and a Sorachian invention he wore around his neck. I had never seen its like—the front was a clock so small I could circumference it by closing my thumb and forefinger, the back was something he called a compass, its red needle always pointing toward the palace. In the dark, I felt Koshka creep ahead, proving she could move as quietly as any thief. Yahontov kept the rear, leaving me between him and the prince, their bodies close enough to feel.

Until now, we had only found dead-ends and abandoned chambers. While I was completely lost, Dimitri had excitedly claimed we were somewhere close to North Gate before we heard the scraping.

I knew my city. During the night and day, I had walked and ran and danced across streets and roofs. This clammy darkness filled with carvings of death and worship was a different world. Even my normally flowing magic shrank inside me, somehow unable to reach the thousands of living Talians I knew must be going about their business above.

Skirr, skirr, skirr.

Like something dragged over the stone floor.

No light broke the darkness.

I encouraged the reluctant magic. If there were people, I should be able to feel them.

Koshka's tense excitement vibrated ahead. Then fear spiked. Controlled terror.

I stretched further, pushing like Morovara had instructed me not to. *You normally bring me too much. I need to know what's coming,* I tried to tell the magic, imagining the world listening. Koshka was already returning when I felt two determined people struggling against exhaustion. They tasted of a burning cold that tainted my magic and settled into my bones—like paler versions of Lumi and Morovara. An echo of Ealhswip herself.

I clenched my jaw to stop my teeth from chattering. *Death keepers*. Perhaps the priestesses I had seen under the Tower, members of the cult Morovara secretly fought against.

Despite the cold and fear, I rejoiced—*we could follow them. I could show Dimitri everything. We would find the food*—then the magic reached further and shrieked.

I staggered into Yahontov's unmovable body, a whimper escaping before I forced my lips shut. In the house Alexei died by, I only had a moment to recognize the dead who moved in the night. Perhaps that was the reason I had not fully felt how twisted the magic was.

Then I ran. Everything inside me screamed to run again. Now.

What moved through the dark was an affront to the Goddess, and the world itself. A wound too tender to touch. A sickness it feared would spread.

Koshka stopped before Dimitri, and I braced for the words I knew were coming.

"Undead." Her voice shook, her whisper carrying too far. "Get out of here. Now."

Despite her fear, she turned, determined to protect her prince.

Yahontov pushed me and Dimitri to the side so that both stood between us and the threat.

"Did they see you?" the prince asked, his question barely audible. While the fear I had expected was there, it was controlled. *Purpose* radiated from him.

I spread my magic again, not all the way to the undead but enough to confirm no one was rushing us. My heart rate steadied.

"No one's coming." *Yet*.

I squirmed under looks I knew were thrown my way until I felt Dimitri's familiar touch as he wrapped an arm around my waist. He knew about my magic and the warmth spreading from his body meant he was not going anywhere.

Yahontov drew his sword. "That doesn't matter. You must—"

"I must continue." Dimitri was already moving without releasing his grip on me. "The King ordered me to find the food. He made it my personal mission to ensure I return to the nobles' good graces. And we need it."

The whispered argument continued with ever-lower voices.

"My orders are to keep you safe."

"Keep me safe while I investigate then."

"Von Uster will hang me," Yahontov rumbled. "Doubly for keeping your secrets."

Despite the heated words we moved as one, Koshka again taking the lead without argument. With danger hanging over us, she and Yahontov seemed to have exchanged temperaments.

From my magic's reluctance to reach further, I gained a feeling of how far we were from the undead.

The closer we got, the harder I squeezed Dimitri's hand, as if clinging to the land of the living.

Death hung over us.

Cold burrowed inside.

Darkness heavier than any night pressed in as scraping steps filled the silence.

We turned a corner. A mage light traveled through the tunnel ahead, outlining shuffling figures ladened with sacks, their slack features otherworldly in the blue light.

Five undead men and women. Before them a priestess's white robe shone purer than anything else down here. I knew there had been two of them, but my magic refused to listen anymore, my body barely doing any better. The second one must have moved ahead of the rest.

The four of us kept our distance, following as silently as we could. Their light did not reach us but seeing what was ahead made it easier to move.

The undeads' unnatural steps, almost falling with each movement, lit a fire, thawing the cold inside. *Whose Spirits had they forced inside these bodies to do their dirty work?* What if someone like my mother was shoved into such a monstrosity? Had hanging one single fingerbone in the Grove been enough for her to gain the Goddess's and Temple's protection? Or had I been praying for years to a Spirit who labored in the dark under Tal?

Morovara had said the Temple tried to care for the world's Spirits when they arrived in Tal, but what about those who died in our own streets? Those taken to the plague pyre outside instead of Temple District?

Watching their swaying step, something inside me clicked. The plague was a poison but targeting the poor had not made sense. It created chaos and anger but surely there were easier ways to do that—the only thing it did for sure was send the bodies to the pyre, bypassing the temples for fear of infection. Perhaps, this also made the Spirits free for claiming. Perhaps, they were enslaved as well as murdered.

Skirr, skirr, skirr.

I moved with no more thought than they, trusting those around me to steer me right while my mind reeled.

The recently dead are easier to control, Lumi had said.

How many had Ealhswip killed? How many undead servants did she have? Or, more urgently, how many did she need?

Dimitri's hand tensed. The caravan had stopped before a sigiled wall. The food could be on the other side. Answers. *Ealhswip*.

We were too far away and blocked by the animated corpses to see the priestess clearly. Moving closer on silent feet, Dimitri pushed past Yahontov. I would not have believed someone raised in a palace could sneak like this. There must be stories behind his quiet steps. Tales I wanted to learn when we made it out of here.

At the border of the blue mage light, we stopped, Koshka pressing her shoulder against mine.

This close, the putrid smell of rotting flesh clung to the air. The priestess's white robe swirled, the red mark on her chest visible, the hood raised, hiding her face.

Her magic spun like an invisible whip against my senses.

She was not opening a door.

Not delivering the food.

Not anymore.

As one, the undead dropped their burdens and turned. Matted hair and torn clothes. Stains of old blood blackened. Eyes filled with Ealhswip's blue fire met mine. Spirit-light escaped through slack mouths.

My legs locked, and my magic screamed in distress. The glowing eyes did not blink.

Once, they had been three men and two women, fellow Talians. Now, they were a trap, and glimpse into our future if we did not get away.

"For our true ruler!" the priestess shouted. "No one escapes."

And again, they moved as one.

Yahontov shoved us back as he raised his long sword. A wind howled through the previously still air. Koshka drew her knives. It was too narrow for Dimitri to draw his own sword.

I had no weapon. No magic against the dead, as if Lumi and I were two sides of the same coin, our abilities never touching.

Yahontov's first swing lodged the sword in an undead man's chest. The living corpse struggled, seemingly unfeeling, but at least blocked the path of the rest.

She cannot be killed, that's what Lumi said when she told me why she needed information on von Lemerch. I now knew why.

I backed away, pulling Dimitri with me.

"The dead cannot be killed," I said and shared my certainty with them. There was no time for explanations.

Koshka nodded while still throwing her right knife. With a *thunk*, it stuck through the eye of a woman. A perfect throw. A meaningless waste of a knife.

The wind helped Yahontov hold them back. Then the impaled man pushed himself further up the sword. The others pressed on behind. No matter how strong Dimitri's bodyguard was, this could only end one way.

"Disengage and run," Dimitri ordered, coming to the same realization. "Get yourself out and carry the news back to the palace."

Koshka threw a second knife and pulled another from her boot in one smooth motion. "We're sworn to you. Get out of here if you want us to go."

Dimitri's reluctance to leave anyone behind traveled through our locked hands. His sense of duty. His grief for Alexei.

He would not go. Would not leave them.

We would all die here.

Koshka seemed to sense the same. "Save your girl. Your honor isn't worth more than her life."

Yahontov shoved forward with a guttural cry. The dead fought in silence without weapons or skill or sound. It did not matter.

A surge of protectiveness flooded Dimitri's other emotions. Perhaps he cared about me enough to see sense.

I pulled him a step back. Then another, saying, "They'll follow."

After a third, he let me go with a shove.

Alone, I staggered into the cold darkness.

The prince did not need to save himself for me to get away.

But I was done running without a fight. I was not letting him go to his death again.

I clung to his hand and my magic as I sought the cracks in his obsidian walls.

"Get out of here. *Run!*"

A flood of power, like when I reached for the griffon, when I stopped Kirill's heart, when I heard all of Tal, rushed from me to him, my words reverberating through the world.

Time stretched.

Magic jumped from Dimitri to Koshka to Yahontov. With a final push and wordless cry, he abandoned his sword lodged in the corpse's chest and turned despite two more undead ripping into his back.

When I ran, they followed without choice. I had promised myself never to override the will of others. This was what Popova had wanted. The turning of men's minds Morovara warned against. What it meant to be a mind witch.

It was not kindness, but how could more senseless death make tomorrow a better day?

With one hand on the wall, I followed pitch-dark paths, hoping only to escape. Steps pounded with mine.

"Following. Slower than us," Dimitri forced the words out between breaths. "Hide."

Did his wind magic tell him that?

The euphoria of overuse was already starting to fracture my thoughts as I tried to feel our pursuers.

The coldness of death chased through the winding tunnels but came no closer. The magic flinched back. I stumbled to a stop. In front—

I clutched Dimitri and Koshka's arms.

"More. Not behind. *Ahead*."

My words landed like a death sentence.

The missing priestess and a mass of freezing magic wrapped around my world. I could feel nothing beyond it.

We were surrounded.

Vanya

My lungs squeezed, the stones and dirt, homes and people above pressing down. Somewhere in the subterranean labyrinth, cold death closed in, but in the dark, twisting passages, I could not tell how close or many they were. Despite our ragged breaths and pounding hearts, the scraping of their uneven gait filled my ears.

"Which way?" Koshka whispered at a crossing, her arms spread to feel the way.

A tiny mage light appeared between me and Dimitri. He held it over the compass until the needle stilled, pointing over my shoulder.

"Ahead. The palace has an exit and our own guards. If you see an opportunity to get away, take it. That's an order. There's no shame in running from impossible odds."

He looked at each of us in turn until we nodded, one by one. I tried to forget my guilt. *Did he know I'd forced them to run earlier?*

The tick of the tiny clock around his neck filled the silence, reminding us we were out of time.

Yahontov took the lead, Koshka followed with a hand on his shoulder to guide her, then Dimitri, and me last, hopefully I would sense if the dead behind us closed in.

Despite knowing we were hunted, we moved as if alone with Dimitri sometimes pausing to give directions when the path branched.

As we took a right turn, a white glow as pure as the priestesses' robes filled the air. A seemingly natural cave covered in tiny white five-petaled flowers spread before us. Flowers I recognized.

In the half-light, Koshka reached for one and I lunged past Dimitri to pull her back.

"It's—"

The curse's invisible fingers closed around my throat. I had not meant to reveal secrets, only to warn her. The identical flower was drawn in the letter, its writer claiming the ones that caused the illness.

Dimitri took in my terror-stricken face and seemed to understand. "Touch nothing. We go straight through."

Could breathing the air poison us? Did you need to dry them? Eat them? I had no idea but could not risk it. Could not risk him.

The others were already moving. Behind, the coldness of death closed in.

I pulled my coat up over my mouth and nose as I hurried in front of my companions, careful not to step on the flowers and waving to get their attention in the low light.

"Don't breathe the air," I said when they paused. "Don't touch anything. Burn your clothes when you can."

I might not be able to say why, but I could hopefully keep us safe.

At my words, Yahontov slowed, giving the flowers and me suspicious looks.

I shivered, as Dimitri's head snapped around and a breeze lifted his hair.

"They're here."

I spun, squinting further into the cave. Something moved silently over the moss and flower covered ground, barely a shadow. Then another. And another.

Every child of Tal knew falling into the Taliell in midwinter was a death sentence. Winter clothes pulled you down. Brittle ice lined the shore. Even if someone sacrificed their own life to save yours, the shock and shivers would take you. As the dead closed in on all sides, I felt the water closing, the cold plunging into my bones, the ice separating us from the world of life and warmth.

Ten. Twenty. More.

Had we been herded here like cattle or only stumbled upon this otherworldly chamber of death by chance? Not that it

mattered. Nothing would change the outcome.

Life taught me to be a thief, a dancer, and actor, taught me enough self-preservation skills to run. I had thrown Dimitri across his own room on instinct, but I was no warrior. Even the knife that never left Lumi's side would be beyond my skill set.

Yahontov, having lost his sword in the first enemy's chest, pulled a knife the size of my forearm from under his coat. Wisps of green light wrapped around the bones on Koshka's armor.

Dimitri shoved his book into my hands and hung the clock around my neck before drawing his own blade, air spinning around him.

"Get us out of here," he said, his eyes carrying words we would never exchange, and stepped between me and the animated corpses.

The dead did not rush like the living would have, they had no coordination, no intelligence in their burning eyes. With the inevitability of a closing noose, they came.

I let my mage light blaze above. Secrecy no longer mattered.

A red ribbon bookmarked one of the finely drawn maps, the lines swimming before my panicked eyes. We needed an exit close to here, but I did not even know where *here* was.

"We move on ten," Yahontov said as the dead spread to surround us. "Or not at all."

My mind screamed for me to face the threat. Adrenaline shook my hands. Cold locked down my magic.

"Nine."

Focus.

"Eight."

Wishmaker, help me.

"Seven."

There's the palace walls. The Temple District.

"Six."

The compass wobbled as I turned the map to align with the tiny needle.

"Five."

But where are we? I could no longer feel a direction without death. We needed to get out. To find the end of the green lines.

"Four."

Running through Tal the night of the fire with magic blazing, then walking its streets these last three-days, I had listened to each neighborhood's song. The places I knew best—Lowtown and Rivertown—had no tunnels, but each day, I had dreamt of the music that I wished to dance to. One of the lines came to an end next to my borrowed home and favorite place in the world.

"Three."

Up, I begged the magic with closed eyes, *away from death or we join them,* then reached for the delicate notes from the strings, the pounding of the drums, the dancers' steps across the Royal Theater stage.

"Two."

In my mind, I danced with them, twirling the magic around me like Dimitri did the wind. *There*.

My eyes snapped open. I traced the lines back to where I thought we were based on the distance and direction of the theater and compass. The dead were only five feet away, each tick of the clock bringing them closer.

I fixed the lines in my mind.

"Left. My left!" I pointed, then realized Yahontov was not listening, but screaming his resistance, blade lifted. Well, fighting the dead his way had already failed. Running, I knew how to do.

I grabbed Dimitri's wind-wrapped hand, jerking him forward.

The energy screamed for me to move and released as I spurted to the side, rolling between two stumbling, once-handsome men.

They reached for me, fingers snagging on my coat.

Somehow, I shrugged out of it, losing Dimitri's book and tearing buttons. Then I was through. The others must follow. Dimitri must follow. But I could not turn around to look. If they were a step behind me, they counted on me to lead the way.

White flowers crushed under my feet. There was nothing to do about it.

The rough end of the cavern approached. No tunnels.

More light.

It blazed like a blue moon. A black hole to my right broke the wall. An exit.

I moved before the thought registered.

An undead woman hacked down with her sword, nicking my arm. Blood heated my cold skin as I ran.

Two more blocked the tunnel entrance. My light moved with me, and they backed away. The dead only came out at night. Spirits could not brave the sun.

I forced more warmth and life into my mage light. The living needed the heat of the sun and Morovara had said my magic was not what I thought. It was life. The normal blue turned white, then yellow tinged the edge and—soundlessly—the dead

screamed.

Dimitri overtook me, shouldered them aside, and we were through. He grabbed my hand, anchoring me to the present while my mind leapt.

I pushed against the death around us, kept the light burning, and reached for the surface. Above, a desire for justice mixed with the hard notes of anger. Chanted protests becoming a chorus to the song of Tal. *The courthouse*.

The green lines from the book moved behind my eyes. It had no exit, no tunnel marked as going under it, proving the map incomplete. The Royal Theater was close. I dared not pause.

At a crossing, I reached for the clinking of glasses, cultured laughs, and the wildness of griffons only afforded by the wealthy of North's Place.

Two more turns, and I forced myself to slow, dragging my free hand along the wall. My head filled with wool when I saw my blood-soaked sleeve. I needed to bind it. The theater was close to the hospital, we only needed to find an exit.

Dimitri breathed raggedly; his strong hand fused with mine. We were alone.

"Koshka and Yahontov?"

He shook his head, pain and loss and guilt rising in both of us. I had not known them, but I had led them to their death. I should never have shown him the tunnels without more preparation. Perhaps if I snuck around here alone, I would not have been spotted. Perhaps if we had waited, Lumi would have been able to tell us more tomorrow night.

"Perhaps they found another way out," I said, forcing hope into existence. "There should be an exit around here."

He nodded, seemingly unhurt but with no words left.

"I didn't mean to find them—I didn't know. There are people who can tell you more. Who can help you find them—" I babbled while I searched, needing to speak over the silent accusations inside me. "The rebels will know—"

"*Rebels?*"

His voice halted me at the same time as a *click* sounded in the wall and it slid away. My bloody hand had slid over a picture of five priestesses. I had not meant to blurt out the meeting, especially not after losing two of his companions. Thank the Wishmaker, Dimitri asked nothing more as the door slid shut behind us, and we walked up stairs too narrow to go abreast.

I reduced my light but could not bring myself to extinguish it when we came up on a brick wall, the mortar crumbling. With knife and wind, the prince pounded it until we pushed through with a *crash*.

Through narrow windows, dawn shone outside, illuminating a manor basement filled with discarded furniture and chests. The meeting was not tomorrow. It was today. We had been searching, fighting, and fleeing the entire night. Finally, I let my light go.

A locked door blocked our way into the main house. The windows were too narrow to escape from. After hammering and shouting to no success we sank to the floor with shoulders pressed against each other. At midday, the servants would wake to prepare for another night of summer parties. We only had to wait.

My head slid down until it rested on his hard shoulder. A shiver went through him. It traveled into me, and each too-tense muscle relaxed.

Time ticked away. Dust danced in the spears of sunlight. I fought the drowsiness that fear left in its wake. Guilt still clenched my stomach. My thoughts spun, part of me lost in the labyrinth below, another too fuzzy with magic.

"It's not your fault. It's mine," I said. "Did you—"

I bit off my question. If he did not know them well, did that lessen the loss of their lives? Lessen my responsibility for yet again not planning well enough?

"No. It's mine." His lips brushed my hair, the warm hand that held mine clenched. "They followed me… Leading others, holding the lives of people you have not even met in your hands, your decisions having consequences you never intended… I told you once, royalty is not all it's cracked up to be, Princess."

"Don't call me that."

He pulled me closer, voice soft in my sweat-matted hair. "Seems I can't see you any other way. Cannot look at Helia without thinking of you. Cannot look anywhere and not think of you. Tonight, you almost disappeared again."

Died. We both almost died.

The rest of his words registered. I should not ask. I had no right. He had just talked of royal duty and responsibility. I did not want to know the answer, but the question vibrated between us, fueled by the heightened emotions of magic use and relief at still being alive—being able to hold and touch and hope.

"Are you marrying her?"

Dimitri 's fingers interlinked with mine. "Helia and I are still working out the details, but it seems she wants to marry me even less than you."

He let out a self-deprecating laugh edged with loneliness and old pain. He might not want marriage, but he wanted something. *Someone*.

He had caught me the first time we met and no matter how we danced, never let go. He saved me when Eki pushed me off the balcony. Again, by rushing me to the hospital no matter who saw.

In the alley during the riot, he killed to keep me safe.

He had all the causes in the world to throw me in prison but did not even threaten it.

And he was not marrying her.

I had sworn not to make the first move, but his kiss had already cracked the walls we built. Life was too fragile to live in fear.

"We don't know what our clothes touched in the tunnels," I said with a hand against his chest, feeling its quickening rise and fall. "It would be irresponsible to keep them on."

"Tempest…"

I moved into his lap, meeting his eyes. They were as strange and beautiful as ever, blue and brown, earnest and imperious.

Everything inside me—music, dancing, running—stopped.

Resting my forehead against his, noses touching, I continued, "You're arrogant and rash, calculated and cold, passionate and caring, a killer and protector." I ran my hand along his jaw, stubble rubbing against my fingertips. "I want you even when I shouldn't. Your touch is the vice I cannot break, the only treat I cannot deny myself. I'm not a princess, but I'm still yours."

"*Vanya*." His tone held a warning. But his hand slid under my heavy hair to rest on my neck, pulling me closer despite himself. "I only have broken pieces to give—I'll not be free until I can pass my crown to someone else—and perhaps not even then."

My lips hovered above his. "But you want me?"

"We shouldn't do this."

"But you want me?" I pressed, brushing my chest against his with each breath.

The princely mask fractured, eyes consuming me. "More than anything."

"Then I don't care."

We moved at the same time, mouths clashing, hands clenching. Shedding coats and control, we broke away to pull shirts over our heads, ripping buttons. The wound on my arm—a shallow long, thin line—had stopped bleeding.

"Later," I snapped, and placed his reaching hand over my pounding heart. The cut reminded me how close we had come to never leaving the dark. To never feel this alive again. Caring for it could wait.

I kissed his neck, tasting salt and *him*—danger and safety. Forbidden and mine. A jolt stronger than the one I'd gotten from the glass crown woke parts of me I could not ignore. No longer wanted to.

I explored the hard muscles of his chest, allowing my hands to travel down and squeeze, delighting in his hitched breaths, swallowed curses, and hungry eyes.

He tenderly loosened my breasts from my binding undergarments. It should have deepened my breath, but each one came as a gasp when his hands surrounded them and fingers brushed my nipples.

Encouraged by the moan I could not keep inside, his hand traveled down my body. Unable to look away, I watched as he came closer and closer to where I needed him.

When his hand drifted under the waist of my pants, my world narrowed.

I forgot to breathe.

He touched me where only one had before. That had been fumbling, drunk on plum wine and dance in the barge's storage room.

Dimitri's reverent hands caressed the past away until I could think of nothing more than getting him out of his remaining clothes. I shuddered as heat clenched inside me.

I was falling and flying. He would always catch me.

He pulled off my boots and pants as I attacked his, resenting each moment of delay. Finally naked, I took in the muscles hardened by training, tensing as if for my perusal. My hands traveled the defined grooves and ridges as the fire in me burned hotter and hotter.

I licked the smooth skin at the base of his collarbone, needing to taste the sun and him. Through my lips, I felt the vibrations of his swallowed curses before moving down his wide chest with kisses and nibbles. I needed to taste everything, feel everything. His fists clenched and eyes burned as he let me explore.

When kissing and caressing in the palace, it had been dark and rushed. Stolen moments and desperation. This time, no one was coming to interrupt. Nothing would stop us.

Pulled like his compass needle, my eyes traveled further down, and I remembered how he once told me about his passions, stumbling over the words when faced with my pretend innocence. Seemed he would finally show me what I had asked for at breakfast that first morning.

"Beautiful," he breathed while hands traveled over my curves, snagging on old scars along the way. Goose bumps rose where his fingers stroked, each nerve awakening.

Then, like a string pulled too far, our patience for exploration snapped and the air between us disappeared.

With kisses and bites, we fell on our discarded clothes. I straddled his hard thighs, the muscles tense beneath me as he left the final decision to me. My hands pressed into his chest as I hovered above him and what we both needed.

Each point of contact burned, sunlight danced across his skin, throwing blue highlights into his wild, silky hair.

I pressed down, searching for friction as he filled me. His mouth closed around my nipple. Our moans mixed.

He set the pace, guided me up and down, and I knew I would never forget the sound of his swallowed groans. We became movement without thought, desire heightened through the magic I could not stop, linked in pleasure until I shattered with his name on my lips. He rolled us over, pressing his mouth to my neck, whispering unintelligible words as he came.

I tugged him close with a sloppy kiss, his still heaving chest sticky and heavy on top of me, anchoring me to reality.

"I'm. Keeping. You," he said between kisses. "Safe. Here. Never letting you go."

A shadow of his fear danced over my cooling skin.

"I'm not going anywhere." I sought his eyes, needing him to know I meant my words.

He rolled to the side, pulling me with him so that we lay side by side, both unable to let go, foreheads pressed together, fingers entwined.

"You're everything I shouldn't want, Tempest. You're freedom and temptation, charity and compassion. You're a riddle and answer."

I snorted. "You're not so bad yourself. Besides being the heir to all of Tal, of course."

He grinned, the princely mask nowhere to be seen. It revealed a perfect dimple in his left cheek. I'd thought him harshly beautiful before, but like this, he was stunning.

"Come flying with me after I've finished my duties at the palace today—assuming we get out of here. We deserve to make this moment last. To escape death…"

I wanted to go. The griffons still terrified me, but Cherny's feathers had been soft under my hands, her feelings deep and calm. But today… In the relief of still being alive, I had forgotten Lumi and the rebels.

"Do you trust me?" I asked.

I had not told him everything, not yet. The guilt returned. He might claim responsibility for Yahontov and Koshka, but that did not dissolve mine. I could only pray to the Wishmaker they'd made it and were celebrating being alive half as well as us.

He brought my fingers to his lips as he nodded. "I know there are things you cannot tell me, that perhaps I shouldn't, but I trust you. You have shown me who you are every day."

"Then come to the Dragon Bridge at midnight. There are people who want to meet you, who can explain much more. Together, we can stop—"

I swallowed my words before they triggered the curse.

His eyes darkened. "Talian rebels?"

I wished I had not blurted that out. Lumi had forbidden me from giving details and I had never broken a promise given to my twin, but I had rehearsed better words. Worry gnawed at me as Dimitri moved to pull on his pants.

"They are part of this?" He waved his hand toward the tunnel entrance.

"They can help, please—"

A key turned in the door leading to the manor above. I only had time to clutch my coat to my chest before it swung open.

"I know it's—" began a bearded Sorachian-looking, portly man before noticing us. He looked back over his shoulder, then the key in his hand, blinked, and with narrowed eyes, seemed to decide to focus on the most pertinent fact, shouting, "Intruders! Thieves!"

Dimitri stood between me and the stairs, bare-chested, pants finally on, when two more men entered the room. His noble's sigil wound around his arm from wrist to elbow, dark and undeniable.

He pointed to the wall we had exited through. "This tunnel needs to be bricked up, by royal command. Bone soldiers will arrive shortly to guard it. You are to give them everything they require. Ready a coach."

They blinked at him as he paused to pull on his ruined shirt and pick up his coat. I hurried to dress behind him, blushing all the way to my chest, as he issued orders as if we had every right to turn up undressed in some noble's basement.

A graying man in a vermilion robe and slippers, with a brass candlestick in his hand to bludgeon intruders—presumably the lord of the manor—stepped past his servants.

"Who do you think you are to deliver orders in my own house?"

Dimitri straightened, and for a moment, he was the dangerous man who caught me in the woods, the one who strode through a dining hall full of nobles expecting them to leap out of his way, the one who rode into Tal, untouched by those screaming their love and hate—the one who killed without remorse to save me.

"I am your crown prince."

The words swelled to fill the silence as the lord froze, his eyes drifting to the still partly exposed noble's sigil—its size and complexity marking Dimitri as royal.

The man lowered the candlestick and dropped into a deep bow, mumbling confused excuses. The servants followed their liege's lead, faces twisted in disbelief.

After that, everyone leapt to offer their assistance—especially if it meant getting rid of the unexpected, irate royal—and we were inside a coach before a quarter of a bell had passed. They had given us new clothes after Dimitri ordered the old ones

burned. I swam in a page boy's attire while his ankles were exposed in too short pants.

As we traveled through North's Place, our lips twitched until neither could hold back our laughter. Terrible things had happened during the night. Undead we could not fight walked below us. A field of poisonous flowers grew ready to spread death—perhaps we were already infected—but at this moment, we were alive and free. He was mine; I was his.

As the coach stopped before the palace gates, Dimitri brushed his lips against mine, seeming to say that while there was no time for anything more, the morning had not been a mistake.

"Third bell. Where can I pick you up?"

I hesitated. "Dragon Bridge… we have to be there…"

"There will be plenty of time before midnight." His hands were on my back, one drifting downward, making it hard to think of objections.

"So you'll come? Alone?"

"I'll think on it. Rebels…" He shook his head. "Tempest, you keep surprising me."

"I'll be waiting outside the Royal Theater."

Third bell would give me plenty of time to convince him. And truly flying… A grin split my face.

He slipped out with a final, lingering kiss that made me shiver and instructions to the driver to take me wherever I wanted to go.

I might end as my mother—a secret woman, mocked and envied for all the wrong reasons. Others might laugh when I called him *mine* and this *love*. But I would know through trust and magic. Being free was not running away, it was living despite everything else. Tomorrow would always be a better day, because I knew that no matter what others thought, we would do our best to make it one.

I ordered the carriage to Popova's shop. Perhaps I could find Lumi again and convince her to release me from my promise. If I could tell Dimitri about her, I was sure he would understand. If I could show him the letter in advance, he would know why we needed to cooperate.

This threat could be turned into an opportunity for a better tomorrow if everyone talked. Soon, he would be king and though I did not know Lumi's position among the rebels, convincing her his rule could be different would be a start. Tal was fractured, but it could heal. I had hope.

Dimitri

Despite the mountain of work before me and two days with barely any sleep, my smile did not waver. My mind constantly drifting to the one who put it there, how she'd looked in the morning light, the lavender scent of her skin and gasping breaths, was a small price to pay. Like the most dedicated cartographer, I had mapped her shape in my mind and my fingers itched to put it onto paper. I would need a new private journal to fill with versions of her, for once would never be enough.

"You would have loved the rumors sure to fly through the nobility today," I said, addressing the air and Alexei's memory. "Me and the princess—or perhaps another woman—locked in a basement undressed."

My friend would never have let it go. I imagined years of his cheeky grin as he brought it up in arguments and needled me until I laughed as well. Any other day, the moments we would not have would have filled me with grief. This day, it made it all lighter to bear. He was gone but never forgotten.

Tempest—Vanya—was mine, and the feel of her was imprinted on my mind. Only her final request marred the memory.

The reasons for talking to the spymaster had been mounting—the final, unknown counselor who voted for my child's death, the question of where von Uster's loyalties lie, that someone had talked about Zakhar's murder, connecting it to Alexei and me, Yahontov being assigned to guard and report on me, tunnels under Tal, and a meeting with the rebellion. It is inevitable. Swallowing my reluctance, I sent a note, summoning him here.

Good people might have died last night because they followed me. I would not make their sacrifice meaningless by throwing away my life the very next day, and I had sworn to Mariska to keep Vanya safe. If something happened to her… My smile hardened. I'd already almost lost her too many times. I'd already proven I'd kill to keep her safe.

Someone had forced her into my life, and while I could not regret it, I would do my best to untangle her from the conspiracies. With me, she would never be free like she wished. I was too selfish to pull away this morning—too selfish to ever let her go—but I would do my best to free her from her other chains.

I pushed away the reports I should have been focusing on. They'd grown over the last two days. The pile surely contained urgent information and requests a responsible ruler would have handled before now. My father was neither dying nor recovered, so over the past three-days, he had sent those who clamored for the king's attention my way. This included invitations to summer soirees and, ironically, proposed noble marriage contracts. I could not afford to ignore it all, for hidden between the polite phrases was information on trade deals and conspiracies. And each three-day, my father expected a report.

Instead of writing down what happened last night, I settled on the sofa, unbothered by the cold hearth and old memories, and clung to the too-rare happiness. I remembered easy days, when I'd smiled more than frowned, and despite being separated from the court, never alone.

I jerked awake seemingly a minute later as someone knocked on my front door. The clock said I had been out for a bell. Time was running like never before. In six bells, I had promised to meet Vanya. I needed to make those count.

"Enter," I called while rushing to change my borrowed, rumpled clothes.

When I returned from my bedchamber, von Uster had settled at my table, pastries and a steaming pot of tea standing where I had left books and maps.

The spymaster sipped his cup, as comfortable as if we had met in his chamber.

His name revealed his Oberwaldian heritage, and I had no memory of his hair being anything other than gray, but the wrinkled golden skin and sharp, almost-black eyes were all Vsadnik. He had been a friend, or possibly more, of my grandfather's, somehow clawing his way to the elevated position of spymaster before he turned thirty and stayed there ever since. Under him, the Roja had expanded. He was the man behind my father, and from his considering gaze, switching from the documents to me, he was not about to retire. Despite being the crown prince, fear rubbed at my nerves as I settled and poured myself tea.

"I expected you to call me sooner," von Uster said, skipping the pleasantries.

I sipped before speaking, knowing he enjoyed keeping people on edge. "You already had someone following me, I assumed Yahontov would tell you what you wanted."

"And that has changed?"

"He's missing." I swallowed my guilt. "If he was free to, he would have returned to the palace by now."

The old man blinked, sadness tightening his face, then with a long exhale, it was gone. "I send you my best and they don't return."

Alexei. My gut clenched. "I asked neither to follow—"

"You should have," von Uster snapped. "You're the crown prince, barely a month away from becoming king. We protect the Crown. Perhaps if you had informed me in advance of your plans, their deaths could have been prevented."

I closed my mouth. He was not wrong. He also did not consider the whole picture. "You serve my father. When he summons me, your Roja come to fetch. When I act, you whisper in his ear."

"He's the king."

I sighed. This was not going as I needed it to. "I didn't call you for a lecture. I have information to share—how much of this will my father hear?"

Von Uster grabbed a flaky pastry, honey and nuts crunching and sticking as he chewed, considering me. I finished the tea. Poured another. The clock ticked until the spymaster wiped his mouth.

"Marriage or not—soon you'll be king. Your father is ill, and even was he as healthy as he was when he took the crown, you'd soon wear it. I never thought he would stay this long in Tal. That man never wanted to rule."

"My father loves power. He's only giving it up to get me to uphold the marriage contract with Oberwalden."

Von Uster gave me a pitying look, and I felt like the naïve boy who just left the Tower again.

"The crown of Tal ties you to the city—or rather what lies below it—and while your father might enjoy power, he never enjoyed ruling any more than your mother. Not like your grandfather and grandmother did." His face softened. "Your parents did their duty and hadn't you messed up three years ago, I expect they both would be gone by now. Inessa on a country estate, living as she pleased, and Ivan always wanted to see the ocean. If your grandfather lived longer, perhaps they'd been skipped in the succession entirely."

I stared blankly into the delicate cup, the picture of my parents rearranging. "My father will leave Tal to see the sea?"

"He used to talk my ear off about the family ships in Mjors. Would follow the ambassador around…" Von Uster sighed, eyes far away in the past.

. He had known my parents as children—as people rather than the King and Queen of Tal, like I never would. I had planned to kill my father as soon as I was crowned. Still did, for his dreams did not change how he had lived, but this one similarity between us, something he had never shared, hooked into feelings I did not want. Even when I held my knife at his throat, he had laughed. My tired eyes stung. How could von Uster see someone so different? Had the throne changed him into this and could leaving change him back into the person—the parent—I had wished he could be?

The tea swirled in the cup, my thoughts no clearer than the murky green. One mouthful, then it was gone, taking my ambiguous feelings with it.

"And if I would ask you, as your future king, for information and order you not to tell my father?"

"If it doesn't hurt the current rule and you would only act on it after you became king, I would answer your question. Call it an advance."

"I swear to only act after the crown is on my head."

Von Uster nodded, placing his right hand on his heart.

I set the cup down and dropped all pretense of casual conversation. "Which Council members voted to kill my child?" The words burned my tongue, spewing the vitriol I always kept inside. I knew three of the names. If he confirmed them, I would know he told the truth—unless his was the fourth one. Then I had just placed a target on my back.

Von Uster frowned until his bushy, white eyebrows connected. "Is that how you want to start your rule?"

"It's *why* I want to start my rule." Let him take that as he wanted.

He poured himself another cup, adding four spoons of sugar, taking the time to consider his words. I clenched my hand on my thigh, struggling not to pace.

Finally, the spymaster faced me. "Each voted for different reasons, but remember your father asked this of them."

"They could have refused. There was no risk to their lives."

"Not their lives—but their standing and financial security?" When he realized I would say no more, he sighed. "Sophina Dorova was the first one to agree."

Alexei had given me that name.

"Mar Heridan has never voted against your father."

True. And now I knew the courtesan he kept. He certainly was not someone to stand for what was right.

"Stasia von Lemerch voted against despite being a traditionalist."

I leaned forward. That was three out of the eight councilors of Tal.

"I abstained, as did Bersig by default as he has almost every vote the last ten years by refusing to return to Tal—his son Kazimir has been seeking an audience with your father for the last three-day. The king is still not receiving visitors but Kazimir refuses to deliver his father's message to anyone else. Perhaps he would talk to you."

I ignored the distraction. "That's four and five." Though von Uster might well be lying about himself.

"Fine. Castle Osipov voted against."

I nodded. His mother was the ruler of Sorach, where all children were holy and no one differentiated between the bastards and legitimate ones.

"Say their names." Von Uster's hesitation confirmed that he had purposefully been dragging it out. Only two Council members remained, but I wanted to hear it from his lips. To watch for tells of deceit. "You said I can trust you. That if we work together, it will prevent further deaths. They deserve what I plan for them."

Von Uster slumped, showing his true age, and accepting my judgment. "Florentiy Makarov and Savva Novikov both voted as the king requested."

Florentiy Makarov—the final name. And while my father lay sick, I was king in everything but name.

And they would soon pay the same price as my son had. Even wearing the crown, I would not be able to execute them publicly, but there were other ways, and no one would dare question me. The crown might tie you to Tal, but it also protected you.

Placing my fist above my heart, I confirmed he had given what he promised and that I would uphold my side—only after the coronation would I act on the information. As long as Helia went along with the ruse, the purpose I had returned from the mountains with would soon be fulfilled. The thought did not give me the anticipated satisfaction—nothing like the thought of stolen moments with Tempest, or seeing the boy escape the riot, knowing I'd saved a life.

I squashed away my unease. There was still business to attend to.

I pushed the royal records I had copied the previous day across the table to von Uster.

"These are notes on the ancient tunnels under Tal. That's where I believe the missing food's being kept and the undead walk—and where I last saw Yahontov and Koshka. I lost the map I made, but all the records are here. Send the Roja, stake out the entrances, report all activity. We need to know who goes in and out. This, you can share with my father."

Because I would not have the time to write a report tonight anyway. Hopefully, it would delay any summons.

Von Uster snapped back to his usual, focused self. "All tunnels are supposed to be blocked since the floodings a century ago. Who are using them?"

It might be the first time in my life I knew more than the spymaster. "The only living I saw were priestesses. But accusing Morovara of raising the dead and staging a coup…"

"Would be the first and last thing you did. And anyone who still approves of the monarchy will turn against it. Especially without proof."

"Is it that bad?" I asked, despite having heard the shouts and whispers on the streets.

"If you read my reports, you would not need to ask." He gestured to the pile of correspondence on my desk. "They are burning effigies of your father on the streets, city guards are disappearing while on patrol. We have doubled the squad sizes but that means they can cover even less of the city. The first clans have arrived for the Day of the Dead festival, but they are refusing to enter the city."

"The clans have arrived?" How had I missed this? "Has anyone spoken to them? My mother?" Some of the clans were matriarchal and preferred to deal with women.

Von Uster shook his head. "All messengers are sent back without response. I would suggest she and Solovyova go to them, as they will not enter Tal. I also suggested that any Vsadnik currently in Tal's prison be released, in a show of good faith. Some believe them responsible for what's been happening to the farms, targeting them. Perhaps that's why they refuse to enter the city, but we need news and trade."

"Do it."

He pursed his lips. "Your father has decided against it. He keeps separate from the general population. There are children among them."

Children in Tal's prison. The cold Tempest had thawed crept back another inch. The world would be better without my father in it.

"I'm your prince. Free them."

Von Uster shook his head, regret in his dark eyes. "But not yet king. The people require a scapegoat."

My mood darkened further. *King*—the one thing I did not want to be and that I had to become. I wanted to improve Tal. I wanted revenge. Did I want them more than freedom? I had told Helia we could have both, but was that true?

I spent the next bell pacing and telling the spymaster of the tunnels and handing over some of the ancient maps so he could place them under surveillance before nightfall. When he stood to leave, my words had run out—still there was one more topic. Tempest's request.

Even hinting at her made gusts of wind whip around my clenched hands. The stolen moment this morning had been perfect. Mentioning anything to the spymaster felt like a betrayal. But von Uster had not been wrong. If I had trusted him with my plans, good people might still be alive, and I would not risk Vanya's life. I had sworn to protect her. The curse prevented her from telling me everything. What if it forced her in other ways? Malicious mind witches could control people's very feelings—my grandmother's deepest fear.

Von Uster had his hand on the door when I stopped the pacing and swallowed my reluctance.

"If the Talian rebels wanted to meet with me alone, what would you say?"

He turned slowly, the wind, twitchy like my nerves, swaying his shoulder-length hair. "That you won't survive until morning. Are you telling me such a meeting is happening?"

He pressed a hand to his temple, as if questioning why after two bells together, I just mentioned this now.

I jerked my head in affirmation. "Tonight. A reliable source says they have information we need."

"Of course, they have information we need." He stalked closer as if barely able to control himself, anger leaking into his voice. "They are behind the inflammatory speeches and probably the missing guards. They take in fighters from the farms and hide them. We stopped an attack on the western guardhouse only two days ago. Their plans *are* the information we need."

"People were hurt?" Vanya would not knowingly set me up, of that I was sure, but what if she didn't know or couldn't say… The inflammatory words I'd heard during the riot, and violence they had triggered, could not be ignored.

"One dead, five we can ill afford seriously injured. We're already stretching the healers treating any mage with plague symptoms. Let me send someone in your stead. We can take them by surprise and stop another attack."

I had only promised Vanya I'd consider the meeting but from her voice, I knew it was important. What we saw in the tunnels… I did not think the information she referred to had anything to do with the rebels themselves. This was Tal and I had a responsibility to the dead.

"I'm going."

Von Uster must have read the determination on my face, for he nodded. "Then we send a Roja hand with you—unless needed they won't be seen—and have bone soldiers waiting in the two closest guardhouses. If not needed, they'll follow the rebels when they leave—but they will be needed."

Five Roja. Would Alexei have lived if I had not sent away the guards? If I had brought more last night, would Koshka and Yahontov have returned? If I wanted to be better than my father, I also had a responsibility to the living. And if it was a setup, I could not protect myself, much less Tempest, alone.

"Midnight. Dragon Bridge."

Von Uster squeezed my shoulder. "They'll be ready. You'll be a good king, Dimitri Ivanov."

When he left, I passed the reports and letters, the maps I should be drawing, and books on long dead priestesses I should be studying. I needed sleep. Tonight was too important to push through and hope for the best.

In my bedchamber, I pushed aside the fine coats in the second closet, revealing a worn shoe next to a glass crown—perfect and impossible. I could not ask someone to return it to the treasury under the Women's Tower without raising questions better left alone. Could not even check if this was a second crown or Tempest had somehow stolen it again. How could I even question her when the answers could choke the life from her?

She had been so pale on the floor of the Archive…

My fingers hovered over the glass spikes, remembering catching Vanya in the woods, not knowing what to think of her but wanting her all the same. She looked at me with such fire. And how Alexei teased me that first night. He had been right—I had been knocked down so far I no longer saw how to get up, but that was changing. Happiness hovered just outside my grasp. After the Day of the Dead, everything would settle.

I drew the curtains and fell into bed with my princess's face dancing before my eyes, imagining repeating this morning's activities in my own bed, the sounds she had not seemed aware of, her half-lidded eyes afterward. It had been the start of something I had not even dared to dream of after what happened with Eki.

I longed to see Vanya again, to kiss her and trace her wild smile with my fingertips. Wanted it to last forever. Something hardened inside me—not ice but a fierce protectiveness. A wish to become the shield instead of the blade.

She'd said she stayed in Tal to help, not for me. I had sworn to Mariska I would protect her. My princess. The tempest I wanted to keep until she swept away all that I was, hopefully revealing the good person I could have been.

It was selfish. She had tricked me, but no one volunteered for the kind of curse she was under. The need to protect her and keep her close fought the rational part of me which said to let her go—far, far away.

She'd shown me how hard her life had been, and I had refused to see. I'd dragged her around Tal and into my lap, using her for my own ends. Would I ever be able to claim her openly?

Could I really offer her a life or was I that naïve Tower boy again? The same young man who believed marrying Eki in secret would solve everything?

She deserves better, a voice inside me whispered.

I would go to the meeting tonight, but I would not risk her. She might hate me when I keep her back, but perhaps that was for

the best. Was my happiness worth tying her to Tal? I had already rushed her unconscious to the healers too many times. How many times would the Goddess turn away?

Vanya

I spent the morning stalking Popova's without seeing a hair of my sister, but used the opportunity to purchase a potion against conception. No need to repeat the past. Then I splurged on a new shirt, napped in the sun, and visited the public baths in Midtown before settling on the theater steps to wait.

At third bell, this part of the city was mostly abandoned, especially in summer when the heat pressed us into the ground. Sweat gathered at my lower back. I wished I could roll up the sleeves of the purple shirt without exposing the fake sigil on my arm.

My eyes locked on Dimitri as the other pedestrians divided before him as if sensing a power I was realizing had nothing to do with magic or status. It was all him, that quiet intensity, a potential for violence others subconsciously perceived. He was solid where I was flighty. He called me Tempest like the wind, and it was not a coincidence the obsidian walls surrounded his mind.

He looked past all others, as if ignorant of the effect he had on the world, until our eyes locked. That smile I'd sought in the Drunken Dead each night turned into a smirk that I returned, doing nothing to hide my own reaction to him—especially not when he was dressed like that.

With the light leather armor I had seen hanging on the wall in his chambers molded to his body, there was a roughness to him normally hidden behind court black and coats. It felt like a lifetime ago I'd first wondered how a prince smelled of leather—how many would I live before this was over? I wished to stay in this one, where we were in love, our eyes sparkled as they met, and my stomach clenched around butterflies instead of fear.

The armor and knee-high boots enhanced his broad shoulders and long legs. Black metal clasps, matching his loose black hair, kept it all in place. Tiny bones hung like epaulets from the shoulders, clinking when he moved. Even those who hated the monarchy could not have helped admiring him like this—he looked as dangerous as when he first rode into Tal. This time, I did not mind at all.

Behind the grief from what happened with Eki and his child, there was an older wound, an emptiness from growing up separate. For a mother who sought nothing outside the Women's Tower and hated his father, perhaps saw traces of her husband in her son. From being ejected from all he knew into the cold embrace of the king. People did not see Dimitri Ivanov; they saw the Crown Prince of Tal—a man to be feared and used and admired. Hated and resented. Judged.

Had I been any different, wanting to kiss him and imagine myself a princess, as if his royalty could rub off? Had I seen anything more than my own fantasy?

He had not wanted the marriage, but he wanted to be wanted. We all did.

Determined to start anew, I smiled as he stopped before me.

"Tempest—you're here," Dimitri said, as if part of him still doubted I would always be. But his lips twitched in answer to mine. "I brought you something. Do you have a place to change?" His eyes roamed my body, as he would rather have embraced me than hand other the bag he carried.

My cheeks heated. I'd already replayed this morning enough times, so was not surprised at the first place my mind went. "You wish to see me naked already? I thought we had a date."

The twitch transformed into a grin. The dimple returned. "You wouldn't offer if you knew how often I'd wish that. I might forget propriety entirely."

Then somehow, I was in his arms, lips fighting, neither surrendering, as it had been from the start. His hand slipped under the light shirt while I had to settle for burying my fingers in his silky hair, trailing my nails down his neck.

As I kissed his jaw, he spoke between swallowed groans. "Cherny will get impatient. Brought you riding leathers."

That shifted my attention from him to the bag. I had feared the bone soldiers my whole life, but the chance to ride in the sky

and wear armor that made me nearly untouchable in Tal… It was not the dresses and dancing I had dreamt of, but it sent a thrill through me nonetheless.

The bag contained leather chaps to buckle on and a hooded, fur-lined vest long enough to cover my knees. Decorated armguards and leather epaulets with tiny clanking bones, these ones without the sigils Dimitri wore. High clasp-on boots, gloves, a wool cowl, and riding goggles finished the look.

As I did not have to remove anything besides my shoes, Dimitri helped me put it on in the alley next to the theater.

He tightened the straps until the armor lay flush against my body, his fingers teasing until my knees threatened to fold, my lips inevitably falling on his again. I still wore his compass-clock around my neck. He tucked it into my shirt with a soft smile, as if he enjoyed seeing me wearing his initials—the onyx "DAI" inlaid in the watch face.

When finished, only Flora's bag remained, containing the blank invites and cramped letters where I tried explaining everything to Dimitri. I wrote them before Lumi found me, when I did not know if I would be able to regain his trust. Even now, if something happened to me, hopefully he would find them and the few truths I was able to put to paper.

The leather creaked when I moved, the bones clanking as they hit each other. Playing dress-up like I had my whole life, poor or rich, it had all been an act until I no longer knew who I was. But when Dimitri's eyes took me in, I knew he saw me. *His Tempest.* The clothes I wore, name I bore, did not matter anymore.

Be yourself, Vanya, my internal voice said, sounding like my mother when she tucked me into bed. *Tomorrow will be a better day, you just see, sweet girl. Just be kind.*

I wanted happy days. I wanted to help. I wanted to belong. Wanted all the things his shining eyes promised.

As two riders holding hands would draw attention, we made our way to Cherny, shoulders brushing and bones clinking together. Dimitri had left her in a small park on the edge of North's Place. I could almost see the von Lemerch manor from here.

No one would dare approach a griffon. He could have left Cherny in the middle of the night market and everyone would have given her ample space.

She clicked her beak when she saw Dimitri approach but stayed put until he whistled twice.

In one smooth motion, seemingly defying the laws of nature, he swung up on Cherny's high back and offered me his hand.

"I've never sat in a saddle," I said, feeling like I was approaching a wall that might be too high to scale.

"Time to change that."

A familiar glimmer awoke in his eyes as he offered me his hand. Swallowing my apprehension, I accepted it and leapt.

He caught me around the waist as if he had done it a thousand times before. *Maybe he and Ekaterina had enjoyed riding together*, my treacherous mind whispered as I settled against his armored chest.

He tucked me close and placed my hands on the leather straps attached to the saddle.

"Don't let go. Lean into the wind. Cherny will take care of the rest." He tightened one of the buckles around my rib cage and attached it to a hook on the saddle, then closed the button at my neck to draw the fur snug around me. His breath tickled my ear until he pulled up the hood and cowl, then lowered the goggles.

"Everyone deserves to fly," he said, "you most of all." And then we were off.

Cherny surged out from the trees, threw herself into the air, and flapped her black wings. They spread impossibly far on both sides, and with three beats, forced the wind under us.

I slid back, pressing against Dimitri. He guided me down and enveloped me with his arms. Like when he held me in his bed, his much larger body wrapped around mine, I felt safe in a way I could not remember. *Precious*.

Wind that had been welcome on the ground chilled as we climbed. I clung to the saddle, glad for the protection of Dimitri's arms on both sides, for as we gained altitude it was more like being thrown up and down in the air than the smooth glide I'd imagined.

The wind now blew like a winter storm, tearing the warmth from any exposed skin as the world below became smaller and smaller under Cherny's feathers. I saw the theater roof where I'd slept. The familiar streets and rivers shrank, the indomitable palace and Women's Tower stood out as black, unchanging monoliths as we circled Tal. On the other side, the Bone Grove and ziggurat temples sent a shiver through me as I remembered the undead and priestesses last night. Dimitri's arms tightened as if he sensed my unease. This was not the time for worries. It was ours.

I had thought myself high up when climbing but then I had still been anchored to the earth. This was something else.

Opening a tiny hole in my mental wall, I reached for Dimitri. Instead of the calm I expected, I found exhilaration and fear, confusion and determination, all mixed with shame. Perhaps he also did not know what we were doing. Was he regretting bringing me up here, or was his mind still on the troubles below?

I reached for Cherny instead, letting the great creature who belonged in the sky center me.

We glided among the clouds, the flat grassland stretching in all directions below. In the prince's arms, I let myself relax and enjoy the open expanse. I was not closing my eyes and missing a moment as we raced out of the city, the empty sky greeting us. For the first time in my life, I would see beyond the Ramparts.

Turning to look up at Dimitri, I found his eyes meeting mine a moment before he bent, pulled down our cowls, and, high above the world, kissed me—badly and perfectly.

He pulled away with a smirk that took years and burdens off his face. I could only smile in return.

Turning toward the horizon, I threw my magic out. *Nothing*. It was not the emptiness of closing myself off, but like we were alone in the world.

Emotions bubbled under the surface, memories of Mother and Lumi. Lana and Kirill. Normally, I would move to escape them, or find a new thrill to distract. Here, I sat and just felt them, completely and truly, without running away. I was safe. Accepted just as I was.

Even with the leathers and fur, after a bell only my back, pressed against Dimitri, retained any warmth and despite the speed pulling my stomach back and awakening my every sense, I was not disappointed when he somehow signaled for Cherny to land.

The sea of grass sped toward me as we dove, making the flight so far seem slow. I had fallen more times than I could count—as I climbed anything I found as a child, when I snuck into noble homes and the Royal Theater, when I climbed out of the princess's chambers and when pushed off the balcony. I used to live for the moment of flight before gravity caught me. The mix of exhilaration and fear and being fully alive. For the first time, I had that together with someone else.

I was falling and flying. Free and caught. Too often, I did not know who Vanya was, but here, there were no doubts. I just was.

Too soon, Cherny balked with her great wings. Our fall became a drift, then the griffon landed with three jaw-shattering leaps before coming to a standstill.

My thighs ached from clenching around her wide back while the adrenaline shook my cramped fingers. Never had I felt so worn out without actually moving.

Dimitri straightened behind me, removing his comforting weight.

"Are you going to faint, Tempest, or are you as wild as you seem?"

I twisted in the saddle, my chest brushing his, and grinned, letting him see my exhilaration. "Is that a challenge?"

"Only trying to understand who you are."

There was admiration in his tone. He had raised his goggles and I had never seen his eyes more alive. I wanted to pull our cowls down and kiss and never let go.

He leaned forward, unbuttoning my hood.

"You wanted to see my passions. There are many things I cannot change, and growing up I would take to the sky to escape them for a moment. Up there, I find peace." He tugged my wild hair behind my ear. "You feel like the wind among the clouds. Uncontrollable. Free. My tempest." He sighed as if it pained him. "I'll do whatever I can to keep you safe."

I closed my eyes and leaned into him.

We sat like that, alone in the grass, the wind singing around us, until Cherny moved impatiently.

I slid off her back—more falling than dismounting—my legs shaking after clamping in terror and exhilaration. Dimitri followed, making it look easy, and from a saddle pocket, retrieved a leather glove with sheep wool sewn across the palm. He showed me how to brush down the great wings and ensure all feathers lay realigned.

My fingers danced over her ink-black shroud while he checked the claws. The scythe-like, gray talons still made me uneasy, no matter how docile the griffon seemed.

We worked in comfortable silence. When done, Dimitri patted Cherny's beak and let her go, then turned to me.

"She likes you."

I watched the griffon walk to the small arm of the Taliell that split the grass. "How can you possibly tell?"

"Because until today I was the only one, she allowed to touch her wings."

All the blood left my face. "Did anyone else try?"

"Many, Tempest, carry scars from trying."

There was completely inappropriate laughter in his voice. Images of Cherny's claws digging into me flashed through my mind. "Why didn't you stop me?"

"Had I seen anything to worry about, I would have said so. Like I said, she likes you."

"And is she a good judge of character?"

"The best." Dimitri's face softened. "The only one she liked until now was me."

The griffon and I have similar tastes, I thought but only gave him a pointed stare.

Part of me had expected us to stop challenging each other after this morning. I was glad we had not. His daring tone lit a fire in me. The animosity was gone but the thrill remained. I wanted to argue, to make him climb a wall and see how he fared, to best him in King's Conquest and then challenge him in other ways with less clothes.

I knew the future would not be the glittering image I imagined, but for a moment, I wrapped the dream around me and pretended it could be real.

Dimitri retrieved plates and cups, a blanket, dried fruits and meat, bread, and a bottle of plum wine from another of Cherny's bags. We both removed the fur-lined vests, hoods, and boots. With rolled-up pants, we sat by the water, watching the giant griffon bask in the heat, the sun finding hidden colors in her black feathers.

I felt his distance return. Did he regret what we had done? Then why would he have brough me here? I would not let him pull back again.

When I leaned close to kiss away the cold, his lips and tongue moved as if he sought to devour me. With hurried fingers and caresses, we removed the remaining clothes, exploring muscles and curves. We both had scars and previous hurts, but slowly, they were healing. This time I did not think of my sister.

When breathless and momentarily satisfied—for I would never get enough of his touch—we dressed enough to protect ourselves from the sun and lounged on the blanket. He held me close, stroking everything from my earlobe to toes with an intense admiration I could not have imagined. He might not say the words, but each touch told me I was precious to him.

The light played in my gilded cup, reminding me that while we wore almost the same clothes, the smallest things were different in Dimitri's world. The fine metal had a dent, as if dropped more than once. Even in Midtown, it could have been the pride of a family, taken out only for special occasions. For him, it was something to throw into a hastily packed bag. Would I ever be able to see only the beauty in things and not what I could sell it for? See its use, like him?

Our conversation mixed with kisses, and as if by silent agreement, we kept to light topics. I told tales from the Rivertown lorists and night market. Dimitri told me how Alexei had hated flying and regaled me with outlandish stories of their childhood antics. In a more serious tone, he talked of how isolating it had been to grow up as the crown prince and his fond memories of the Tower. He lay on his back, me on his shoulder, as we watched each other and the clouds high above.

Playing with my hair, he told me how a country noble had become the best friend of the crown prince. "At eight, Alexei was sent to Tal to treat a childhood illness and gain connections. He'd grown up with servants' sons and daughters, joined the farmers during harvest—ran as wild as you." Dimitri smiled down at me, caught in the memories of his friend.

"Then he joined your lessons?"

The prince chuckled. "Not on purpose, but he was brilliant and had not been brought up with our strict etiquette, so he just started listening in. We were taught in the Tower's garden, but no one else dared approach. Our teachers ignored him, but he kept making these quiet jokes and bringing stolen treats. He was my first friend."

And when he saw me for who I was, he didn't judge. Alexei had asked me to protect Dimitri. I was not sure I had been doing a very good job.

"I wish I'd known him better," I said, and meant every word.

"You would have been great friends, Tempest." Dimitri sighed, letting go of some of the grief. "He got me into mischief I wouldn't have even thought of on my own—without his influence I might never have stepped out of line. Eki joined us a year later. Riska was the last, a few years younger but always wanting to tag along." He chuckled, chest moving against me. "If caught we blamed her. She was so cute, no one was angry for long."

"I'm sure the three of you were proper terrors." I hesitated, the tales of my sister threatening to spill out. But I had *promised*. I knew she would hate the crown prince knowing her secrets and childhood embarrassments. *Kindness*, our mother had said, *even if others do not show the same*. Just because Lumi had not listened did not mean I should ignore Mother's words.

Soon, Dimitri would know. Seeing my twin might be a shock, but I would be there to explain. It would be fine.

"Do you still see her—Eki?" I asked instead, knowing that perhaps this as well was out of bounds. "She was the one you followed when you left me at the welcome banquet, right?"

"I'm sorry." Dimitri kissed my temple. "I needed to talk to her—the last time we saw each other was over our child's pyre the day after our failed wedding. I wrote so many letters, but none were delivered."

"Do you still…"

"Love her?" He shook his head. "Like a sister perhaps. One I'm very angry with. Riska told me Eki has barely been seen outside the Tower since it happened… I didn't understand what it must have done to her. It was bad enough for me, but to have a child forced from your body. How she screamed…" He swallowed and looked away. "She's the one who pushed you from the balcony. I should have told you earlier, but it's all my fault. I cannot have her arrested. Cannot take anything more away."

"She pushed me?" I did not even remember seeing her there. "Why?"

"Something inside her must have broken. The girl I knew would never have hurt anyone to get a crown. She wanted to marry to protect our child, not for power. I think we both regretted what had happened between us by then."

He squeezed my hand as if to reassure me. How could I explain I did not need to be coddled?

The attempt on my life, or possibly on Helia von Heskin's life, should perhaps have upset me more, but so much had happened in too short a time. Next to Ealhswip's threats and discovering I was a cursed mage, the fall had slipped my mind. The words I heard under the Tower, confused by the magic I'd used, replayed in the back of my mind. Eki had been there, complaining I was to marry the prince. By then, she had known I was not a princess. Ealhswip had told her not to interfere… Could she have seen killing me as a way to save Dimitri, or was she as twisted as she seemed?

He kissed my cheeks, and I pushed the thoughts away. Ealhswip would not get to ruin this moment of peace.

We wet our feet in the stream, he and Cherny let me practice getting in and out of the saddle, and we talked and kissed and talked more until the sun touched the horizon. It set slowly in summer, there was no hurry, but something shifted between us. A tension tearing at the perfect afternoon. The distance we'd kissed away returning.

"Griffons don't fly in the dark, right?" I asked. It was time to get ready for Lumi. "You said you'll consider the meeting tonight."

Dimitri backed away.

"I'll go." His closed-off face killed my elation. Something was wrong.

He snapped on his armor with practiced speed while I searched for my own. Dressed, he removed another bag from Cherny, offering it to me without meeting my eyes.

"There's a tent in there and more food," he said, his voice hollow.

I did not reach for it. "Why would I need food? A tent?"

He stayed at Cherny's side and placed it in the grass.

"I'm going alone. You said they want to meet me. The danger… the rebels have been killing people." His voice steadied, eyes begging me to understand but offering no apology. "I'm not losing anyone else I love. Not through rash decisions. Curse me if you want, throw me into the Taliell tomorrow. Ask anything from me besides bringing you into danger yet again."

He leaped onto Cherny's back, somehow signaling it was time to fly.

He was leaving me. Going to see Lumi. A rebel and prince meeting without anyone to mediate.

"No! I need to be there. You don't understand!"

Cherny took three steps, gaining speed. She spread her wings, flattening the grass around her.

Dimitri lowered the flying goggles and raised the cowl. "Tomorrow. One night and I'll be back, Tempest, I swear it."

And then they launched into the air, becoming a black dot growing smaller and smaller.

I screamed his name in rage. Then just screamed until I had no air left. Swaying grass stretched uninterrupted in all directions. Nothing else moved. There were no sounds besides the wind and hidden crickets.

I was alone.

My first time outside Tal and I wanted nothing more than to return.

How far had we flown? Surely, we had not been in the air more than a bell, some of that spent circling the city. The moon came out as if mocking me.

Dimitri and Lumi would kill each other. There would be no cooperation. No solution. All the plans I'd made, for nothing.

I spun, searching for any landmark. Something heavy tugged at my neck. The clock. I pulled it out, checking the time. Four bells until midnight. I wanted to shout at the onyx "DAI" like I had at its bearer. Instead, I flipped it over.

The red needle pointed toward the palace. Was that still true?

With nothing else to guide me, I snapped on my boots, shrugged into the armor, grabbed the water from Dimitri's bag, and started running.

Vanya

Trying not to limp, I ran below more stars than I had ever seen before. New boots—no matter how fancy—were not meant for a trek for several bells. The water from Dimitri's bag was also long gone by now.

The man I had been sure I could never have, had lit as many stars inside me, and since he literally caught me, my world had not been the same. He had risked his life to save Lowtown, lost his best friend, and even more than me, been hurt and deceived by the people who should have loved and protected him. He had claimed he knew the real me. How could he think I would stand aside?

Setting my eyes ahead of me, I continued despite the pinched toes and ragged breaths. I would never be a long-distance runner, but every time I slowed, I imagined the two people I cared about most in the world meeting and all chances of cooperation disappearing. My carefully laid plans and hopes meant nothing if I could not make it to Dragon Bridge by midnight.

Lumi would not share the letter. Dimitri would see my twin and believe he had been tricked—again. After yesterday… The terror shaking me screamed the trust I had once sought so I could deliver even harder truths had become more important than anything else. He'd accused me of seducing him. His father had betrayed him, those close to him reported his elopement, and he spent years planning revenge—I did not believe there was an ounce of forgiveness left in Dimitri Ivanov for me unless I stood at his side, ready to explain, when he met my twin sister.

Stars I could not name twinkled, like the forgotten gods watching over my race against the clock.

So far, I had seen eleven Spirits drifting toward Tal. While keeping my distance, I rejoiced, for they confirmed I had made the right decision in following the compass needle. All the world's dead came to Tal—despite everything I had learned, that remained true.

With a throat as dry as the dark grassland around me and legs wobbling with exhaustion, Tal's glow finally broke the night. One bell left.

There was no renewed energy to draw from, only determination kept me from sinking to my knees before the welcome sight. I mumbled a prayer for every step. To the Death Goddess to look away. To the Wishmaker to allow me to make it in time. To the nameless goddess of love, and all the other forgotten ones. Then I made up new ones—a goddess for travel, one for stupid men, for difficult sisters, for the kindness Mother talked of, for time itself, begging it to slow.

The Spirits now streaming into Tal brightened the night, and the scent of burned flesh hung in the summer air. I knew where I was.

Steps and minutes passed until the flames and Spirits illuminated the city wall. Despite my urgency, I stopped to catch my breath, the past tearing at me.

The pyre had stood cold for five years, grass overgrowing the burning grounds. This was where they brought Mother's body. Even from here, the brilliant white of the priestess responsible for all the damned dead shone. Her chant and drum, barely audible above the wind, raised the hairs on my sweaty arms. *Did she belong to Morovara or Ealhswip?*

The Spirits spiraled around the priestess, caught in her music and magic. She was supposed to guide them to the Bone Grove. But Ealhswip brought the plague for a reason and five years ago there had not been rebellion or attacks—at least none I had heard about—so why had so many had to die?

Anger licked my insides as I turned away from the smoke. It did not matter what had happened with Herebov three hundred years ago. Some people no longer deserved kindness. My mother had never hurt anyone—in her own way, she had believed she brought love and happiness. Even Kirill had cared for her. I had seen how his eyes softened as he spoke her name, knowing he would have sold us off for real if he felt nothing for her. She had deserved kindness; instead, both her life and death had been stolen to fuel a woman who should have been long gone.

Rage narrowed my vision as I found Pilgrim's Road and followed it toward the only gates always open, for no one stopped the pilgrims from reaching the City of the Dead.

On the left side, the first Vsadnik tribes had set up camp. Firelight played against the colorful tents and neighing horses joining the normal chatter of traveling pilgrims. The Day of the Dead—the largest celebration of the year—was only a month away. I entered the city behind a wide coach, speeding my steps. By the Wishmaker's miracle, I still had a quarter of a bell left.

I swerved between pilgrims and vendors. If I did not make it before Lumi and Dimitri arrived, at least I would be there before they left. Perhaps they could scream at me instead of each other. Perhaps we could share a drink. Perhaps everything would be fine after all.

Dragon Bridge was not far.

Pilgrim's Road ran between the Bone Grove and Temple District. Among the black pagodas, more priestesses chanted, their voices overlaying the usual bustle.

I cut through the Grove, the familiar bones clicked in the breeze. Spirits drifted thick as fog between the stems, the winding paths unusually empty. The threat of rain hung in the air but it would normally not have been enough to dissuade the pilgrims.

Then on the outskirts of the Bone Grove, near our mother's tree, enough Spirits to light the night all floated in the same direction I was running.

A chill shook my body as warm raindrops fell.

The first midnight bell rang.

I sprinted, throwing my magic out.

Like a blanket had been ripped away, I felt Lumi before me.

Rejoining the road on the other side of the Grove, lanterns shone through the night. My feet pounded across the ancient cobbles.

The last bell rang. Midnight. The people usually filling the street were replaced by Spirits.

Between one step and the next, Lumi's familiar presence turned colder than the mountain wind. My magic flinched away like it had in the tunnels.

An obsidian sheathed mind stood next to her.

Too late.

I no longer noticed my surroundings.

My feet slipped on the wet stones, and I slid down the muddy bank. I had reached the Distal, the arm of the Taliell already rising as the rain increased.

The trees stopped and Spirits congregated. Their eerie light, familiar and strange, lit the scene, and I knew Dimitri had not come alone. Guards stood at the arch of the stone bridge surrounded by death.

The group trapped on the bridge were outnumbered and outmatched, for among the Spirits white-robed figures closed in. As I watched, one of Dimitri's guards fell at the Spirits' touch.

Was this because we found the tunnels? Did Ealhswip no longer need the crown prince? Had the thought of the royals and rebels allying against her pushed her hand?

Another fell.

Was Lumi hindering or helping? Had she run?

I could no longer feel her. Panic and rage locked my legs. Ealhswip took our mother. Took everyone. Clutching my refusal to accept that thought, I moved again, despite my magic screaming to stay away. At least I did not see any undead.

I passed under the bridge and climbed the ancient pillars covered in slippery moss and algae. Luckily it was not high.

Someone screamed, the high-pitched terror cutting through my magic.

I scrambled over the railing where lovers traditionally met to whisper prayers to the Wishmaker.

Dimitri and three men stood back-to-back on the bridge. None noticed me as I landed behind them. It was impossible to distinguish more than white-robed shapes approaching through the Spirits and rain.

Unnatural wind and a man whose hands were coated in flames kept them back.

For now.

Dread filled the air.

The two fallen—a man and a woman—had been dragged behind the lines. Their eyes were wide open, the man whimpered though I could not see any wounds. The woman was already gone. Death never had dignity, but this was something else.

At least she was not Lumi.

The magic buzzed in my veins.

Unable to turn away, I grabbed the man's hand, ready to somehow ease his passing.

His terror became my terror, a primal one all creatures felt for what hid in the dark, the feeling of death's hand resting on your shoulder and the bone trees calling your name. A horror strong enough to stop your heart.

His grip tightened until painful, pulling me closer, reminding me of my own body.

How do you combat fear? *With hope*. Hope for a better day. Hope that everything will pass. Hope that when it's all over, you

will be able to put the pieces together.

Humming the nursery tune my mother used to sing, I shared the feeling of safety. Of moments when things were bad and I heard music, remembering there was still beauty. I took the feeling of soaring, so similar to flying, and pushed it into him with all my might.

Something broke—in him or in me—and his grip relaxed, wonder spreading across his slackened features. I smiled back, tears drying on my face.

Then magic, cold and deadly, pushed back. Someone was controlling this.

I stood. This would not be won by saving one person. I needed to stand and fight, no matter the odds.

Despite Dimitri's people firing arrows from hidden crossbows, the robed figures were halfway across the bridge. More seemed to be fighting below us.

With magic and sword, Dimitri swung at a priestess no larger than me, face covered by a porcelain mask. She lifted a hand and the Spirits moved against the prince's wind and covered the three remaining defenders.

With cries of terror, they fell.

The Spirits did not touch me as I leapt past them without thought. I had no weapons. No plan. But I was not running away.

Dimitri, his mind trained against magic like few others, fell to his knees as the bones on his armor burned green. In his lowered hand, I saw a knife.

Above them, Spirits swirled, like all the dead of Tal had come for this night.

The priestess lifted her hands.

What would happen when she brought them and the Spirits down?

Death.

Death always came to Tal. The man I helped had been dying of fear. That's how my prince would end. I saw it play out in my mind. He would launch forward. The Spirits would descend. No matter how trained, he could not fight off that many.

A weight pressed me down. The Goddess had turned her gaze our way.

We were all dying here.

Magic pulled at thoughts of revenge and horror not my own. Like when I fell from the balcony, my mind expanded until I was both me and all others. Somewhere, Lumi's fear spiked. The prince saw me and despaired.

The priestess's hands descended like an ax.

Dimitri lifted his knife—too slowly.

My magic was a wild animal, swelling with my emotions until it ruptured like the boiling pot Popova spoke off. It only held one word, one command, one plea.

STOP.

The obsidian walls cracked. Dimitri froze, knife half raised.

The priestess turned as if moving through the mud below, expressionless mask facing me.

My vision fractured. The power made each rain drop glitter. The world warped. Still, I threw myself between them, grabbing Dimitri's knife. Last time I held a blade, Lumi had told me to not hesitate.

I had never trained with a weapon. Never wanted to kill. But I was fast.

Ealhswip would not claim any more of my loved ones.

Too slow, the priestess raised a hand as if to halt me.

The knife pierced the robes, then flesh.

The world stalled. The Goddess pressed down.

Pain exploded in my chest, as if I too had been stabbed. The cold magic of death tore through me, finding no purchase.

Unable to tell where my mind ended and began, I fell together with the priestess's limp body.

When the Goddess claimed her, darkness took me as well.

Vanya

A wet cloth gently cleaned the dried sweat and blood from my face. Above, the stars laughed. I recognized the effect of magic overuse this time, knew that the screaming pain in my soul must mean that I had finally, irreversibly, broken something inside.

A whimper escaped my lips as I clutched my hands to my chest. I had killed—again—and now I was dying because no one could survive this pain.

"There's no wound," someone said, removing the soothing fabric. "How do I help her if there's no injury?"

Dimitri.

I lay in his lap. Past and present overlapped. Day and night, my body heating and dying, but the feeling that he would not let anything hurt me remained. He was safe.

I had made it in time.

Somewhere far away, beyond the piercing pain, anger still smoldered. He left me behind.

Above me, his eyes glowed, and dripping dark hair clung to his chiseled jaw. There was no sound of battle, just people talking in hushed tones, as if what we had experienced this night would remain untrue until someone heard.

Those who remained had faced death and survived, but, like me, they were altered. For the prince, I had taken a second life, when for my sister—my blood and second half—I had not been able to. Without recognizing it, I had become one of those who thought there were things worth not only dying for, but killing for.

The relief I should have felt at waking stayed out of reach, as if parts of me had separated, floating wrapped in pain on top of my emotions.

"It's magic overuse, yes, but also something else. Her body thinks it's dying," a cultured voice said. "She must block her magic."

An older, armored man narrowed his eyes, as if he could see through me. More bone soldiers surrounded us.

My ragged breath quickened.

Dimitri leaned closer until we were sharing air. His face blocked out the world and his hand pressed against my cheek. "It's finished. You need to stop it. Do it for me, and it will all be better."

Something inside me was sliding into place, like the gears in a lock when the right key turned. The pain intensified until all I could hear was the melody of his words, their meaning tangled.

A door inside me opened. The bond to Lumi widened until ripping me apart. Was she reaching out because of my magic overuse? Where was she?

The magic slammed back into my body, and I pushed it all shut, rebuilding my wall.

It was too much.

Too much pain.

I fixated on the prince's caring eyes. I was here and we were both alive. Lumi had finally decided to reach out when I was drained and hurt. She could wait another moment. I was in no state to argue.

Soon, I tried to whisper to her.

A soldier behind us cried out. Setting me on the ground and lifting a sword in the same movement, Dimitri turned, as if ready to defend me from the unknown threat. The moon painted him in impossible colors.

"Ivanov, you must see this," the old man said.

Dimitri stepped aside for the two riders approaching with the priestess's corpse, dragging it by the arms so that it resembled a person on their knees. The scene was eerily similar to how I had found Dimitri, though he had been the one kneeling.

He bent over the corpse, blocking my view.

"Impossible." His voice shook the fragile calm inside me. "What trick is this?"

"We removed the mask. No creature can change its features."

Those holding the dead priestess stared at me.

Dimitri lifted me so that I mirrored the priestess, less than a handspan remaining between our faces.

Her features had gone slack in death. The scar stood out against the otherwise unblemished, bloodless skin. I knew every line, every expression besides the one it currently carried.

It was my own face, after all.

It had been the first thing I saw in the morning, the last thing at night, and every time in the mirror. Once, we had been one.

A scream built in my throat—the wail of a hurt animal, unnatural to my own ears. Half of me was dead, and I had killed her.

My world fractured again. This time, there was nothing magical about it. No loving arms holding me together.

I was one person before this moment—one of a pair—and after this, I would be alone, broken, cursed.

I killed my twin.

It was impossible and still, her lifeless body faced me with the unrelenting truth.

Why was she dressed like a priestess?

The foreign panic I had felt when I stepped between them. The hesitation when I lifted the knife.

She had not come to talk. Only I had been stupid enough to trust. Both had kept their plans from me. Or perhaps if Dimitri had been alone… If I had been here…

My eyes could not leave her empty ones and none of the questions mattered. They were the things the Vanya of before would have cared about, obsessed over, and hunted the answers to. Now nothing mattered because I had killed the one person I should have followed anywhere. The one person I should have protected with my life. Killing her, I had killed myself.

Strong hands shook me. Unresisting, I flopped to the ground without taking my eyes off my sister, as if she would wake any moment and I had to be there. Instead, they let her go, her brown hair covering her dead face, body unnaturally lax on the cobbles.

Dead.

Every time I told her we should run from Tal, that it did not matter we did not have the funds for a long journey, she would tell me you cannot outrun death, and the dead all went to Tal.

The prince turned my face to his, talking without me registering the words. For the living Vanya, his presence had meant safety. She had loved him. The dead girl watching him knew she had killed herself for him. From the anger and betrayal painted across his chiseled features, it was only a matter of time before he completed the act.

People talked above me while I watched the stars. There was only darkness inside, every light suffocated. There was no music. No feelings.

Someone threw water across my face, then another slapped me, but the dead do not feel pain. Only when they moved *her* did the scream inside unfreeze.

They could not take her away from me. We were one.

Someone talked, then held me back as I struggled, biting and scratching my captor.

They wrapped her roughly in a coat.

Kicking, I twisted and rammed my elbow up. With a sudden cry, my captor's grip slackened and I threw myself toward Lumi.

As long as she remained before me, she could perhaps return and tell me it was all a hoax. A scam. Another plan she kept from me.

On the ground before her, they caught me again, pressing me to the ground. A healer placed his hands over my eyes.

Magic swallowed me whole, and finally, I let it, escaping a world where I no longer belonged.

* * *

Someone carried me. The warm arms around me felt like home.

Time passed and looped as I shivered with unnatural cold.

When I tried to move, I realized my hands were tied behind my back. I opened my eyes and recognized the place despite the darkness.

I once strode in here dressed as a noble during the crown prince's engagement ball. I escaped in a ruined dress. I ran from a lady. I left as a thief in the night, determined to be better. We had stopped at the closed palace gates.

Exhausted minds brushed against mine.

A man was calling to be let inside.

Pain swam through my muddy mind.

More people came. Arms tightened around me. Dawn broke the night.

My vision cleared as we entered the courtyard and stopped before the fountain of Herebov and Ealhswip. The giant woman observed me with familiar eyes.

Dozens, then hundreds—men and women, rich and poor—surrounded the battle-worn bone soldiers in the gray dawn.

A beautiful man in elegant clothes, perfect despite the early morning, moved through the crowd. He resembled Dimitri

enough for me to believe them relatives.

When he stopped before us, something unspoken passed between him and the crown prince.

"Nikolai." Dimitri's clipped tone was colder than the high winds we had traveled.

"Your father died last night." It was said so offhand I did not understand at first. Then Nikolai sank to both knees and raised his voice. The image brought back my memory, but the next words distracted me from my own pain. "The king is dead. Long live the king."

The ground shook as cooks and cleaners, servants and soldiers, healers and nobles dropped as one, echoing Nikolai's words through innumerable throats. In the distance, a bell rang. Then another, and another.

Dimitri tensed, then his shock morphed into resignation. He lowered me to the ground and placed his fist over his heart, calling, "For Tal!"

"For all," they answered, some crying, others cheering.

Foreign hands carried me away as our paths branched—believing even for a moment we could travel the same road had been the biggest lie of all.

"Long live the king," I whispered into the dawn.

A woman with brown-black curls and glasses approached Dimitri. Helia von Heskin, too much like my sister. Too close to the things I could not think about. The past bell came rushing back and I slammed up my mental walls.

I clenched my teeth against the wail inside.

A hand touched my temple and the empty darkness returned.

* * *

I spun in and out of my mind, shaking with tears and fever. Terror and pain. Forced water and forced sleep.

The cold never left me.

A banging echoed along empty stone hallways. Metal clanked when I moved. Somewhere, another prisoner cackled, and despite the insanity tainting her few words, I recognized Flora von Heskin's voice as it interlaced with my nightmares.

When consciousness returned, I recognized the place I had feared since the first time Lumi proposed we turn to theft. It was the year after the debt marks appeared. Kirill had taken us in the year previous and, in a chipped tone, explained Mother had belonged to him. She had borrowed money and paid the only way she knew—through her body. He gave us the marriage contract to read and as the words swam before my eyes, I imagined my gorgeous, ethereal mother with the brute before me.

By the time the fine dresses Mother had bought reached our knees, Lumi pointed out the silver bangle at the night market. Kirill had instructed us to stand outside the tent while he settled business inside. By then he used us to run messages and threats, and we reflexively ducked when someone raised a hand.

Lumi had whispered that no one was watching. That it was *right there*.

Her crisp green eyes had pushed me forward. Already, she was the thinker, I the doer. As my hand closed around the metal, I did not fear the busy merchant who manned the stall, for in Tal thieves, no matter their age, were sent to one place. That time, no one caught me.

Since my hand closed around the silver, I had known there was only one place this journey could end, even if the road here had taken four years. I had not anticipated the despair seeped into the very stones of the prison of Tal.

I would never leave this place.

Never would I see my own eyes in another's face.

Rolled into a ball, I wept. There was no longer anywhere I wished to go except to follow Lumi in death as I should have in life.

Either someone had not noticed that I regained consciousness, or they no longer cared, because bells passed. I pulled the riding leathers closer around me. Dead women did not freeze, but my insistently clanking teeth could not be ignored any longer.

Heavy irons moved with my hands. I traced the chains back to the wall above the bare stone ledge serving as a bed. At least I had my own cell with light filtering in through holes which could barely be called windows. In the stories, only the most dangerous criminals got that, the rest were locked in by the dozen. Often, they never reached the hangman's noose.

But being alone in winter would have been another kind of end. People froze to death here. It was considered a dignified way to go—the slow embrace of the Goddess—compared to the beatings, infections, or sudden drop that awaited the rest.

Singing drifted through the windowless stone corridor. A man's voice. It pulled me out of my stupor, the jaunty tune about meeting a Rivertown lass so at odds with our surroundings. When one song finished, he started another. I shivered as he sang the first words of "The Undead Queen and the King." A meaningless lovers' lament I had known since my mother sang us to sleep. It told of the queen who would defy even death to return to her lover. How she bartered with the Goddess and in the end, they got a place in the stars.

I sweated despite the cold, as if my body no longer knew how to react. The parallels to Herebov and Ealhswip were hard to miss—still, I had. How many more clues had I danced right by? Marching steps interrupted the singer before he finished.

"Wakey, wakey, girl," someone called and banged on my iron bars. "Time to provide answers. You don't want me to throw water—the chill now's only a taste."

I pulled myself up and scooched into the furthest corner. The speaker, an aging woman larger than most men, with pallid skin that told of days spent in the dark, smiled without mirth.

"That's a good girl, finally listening. Don't try anything now. Your unnatural powers won't work here. This is the mage's ward. Nice, clean, and hardly used. Lucky girl, you are."

I did not respond. *Lucky* was the last thing I felt.

More shoes hit the stones beyond my narrow view, and I wished the song would come back, no matter what realizations it brought.

Dimitri, in gold-trimmed royal blue instead of his familiar black or leathers, face impassive and hair cut short in grief, seemed a different person. Behind him stood Koshka—somehow impossibly alive but lacking her bone armor. Only the boots, as red as blood, remained. Our doomed positions had been reversed and neither smiled as our eyes met. Mariska, the old man from the bridge, two more guards, and an older nobleman I did not recognize joined them on the other side of my bars.

The jailer bowed deeply. "Your Majesty. We're honored."

"Leave us." He did not even look at her, disdain and suppressed rage dripping from his voice. The lanterns illuminated the sharp panes of his face, like cut ice.

My heart, which should lie dead with Lumi, beat faster in his presence, like an animal trained to expect something good.

That's over, I told it. *Everything is over.* He tricked you. Left you on the steppes. If I'd been on the bridge from the start, it would have ended differently.

Lumi came disguised as a priestess, the disloyal part of me argued. *She never wanted to talk. No one besides you wanted to cooperate.* The jarring thud as the blade scraped bone replayed inside me.

"Time to give me real answers, Komarova," Dimitri commanded without a trace of the laughing prince who taught me to brush a griffon.

Our eyes locked and the others disappeared.

"I can't. You know I can't." My voice, hoarse from disuse, sounded strange in my own ears. "Why am I here?"

Ending up in this cell felt inevitable now, but flying together, sharing each other, I had convinced myself that even if the lies unraveled, Dimitri would still care for me.

It was the old man who answered, "Among other evils, you've been arrested for treason and conspiring to murder the crown prince. Everyone witnesses your duplicity and there's no lack of evidence. Talk to help yourself. None of those who attacked him were priestesses, but one was your sister."

By the glimmer in his eyes, he had no intention of helping no matter what I said. He was fishing for information to use against me and Lumi. No one would ever get another piece of us; we had both given more than anyone should have to. We had not asked to be pulled into this world of politics and danger, and now she was no more.

Because of him.

Because of *me*.

How could they blame me when I killed my sister? How could he think I tricked him when he was the one who deceived me?

I did not argue. I deserved the hate, if not for the reason they thought.

Each choice leading me here played through my mind as I tried to find the one decision I should not have made, the one that changed my path. Was it the failed theft? Or trying to trick the crown prince instead of fighting to get away with the crown? When I placed it on my head and dared to dream? Was it years earlier, when I flirted with a boy, Lumi out of sight, and she came back sick and wounded? Was it when we failed to get a healer for Mother? Was it when Popova cursed us as children?

"I will talk then," Dimitri said, bringing me out of my endless loop of hurt. "You led me to believe you were merely an empath, then use your powers to control us all. How many times have you twisted my emotions, heart turner?" It sounded like a curse in his mouth.

Only on the bridge, I wanted to say, but that would have been another lie. In the tunnels, I forced everyone to run, knowingly stealing their autonomy. Already, before I understood what I was doing—when I sank in his sea of grief alone on the bench weeks ago—I had changed something.

I had used my powers to ease his mind when he lay dying on the streets of Lowtown. To find him innumerable times. To feel closer in the dark. To order him to stop on the bridge. That I desired only to help was irrelevant.

Not waiting for my answer, he continued with barely restrained rage.

"We found two letters—one filled with platitudes on you and one on your sister addressed to my father. How do you think she got that? Counselor Bersig's grandson was sent to Tal when the king didn't respond to their world-altering discovery. If we had known about the plague sooner…"

The betrayal in his eyes was real. I had done this.

"I tried to give them to you," I said, knowing I had not. "I tried to help."

"Perhaps you did. Perhaps that was also part of the ploy."

"I…" Under the coldness of death, sorrow twisted and anger bubbled. I had killed for him. Shared everything I was with him.

"I have no idea how you managed to access the king's chambers, though for a mind witch and a necromancer normal rules don't apply, do they?" He continued remorselessly. "The night I found you in my chambers, you didn't come for me, did you?" Hurt flitted across his face and shoulders slumped. "Even the crown prince is just a piece for you to play with. Did you laugh at my gullibility as you used your powers to twist my feelings?"

The words cut into my stupid heart. Somehow, it still had the capacity to bleed. This was the prince others had feared.

When it was clear I would not answer, he pulled out the familiar paper and cleared his throat to read the words we both now knew.

"Ivan, I have been investigating the death of your grandfather, my dear friend, and found something larger. By studying the deaths of five noble and three lowborn mages I've found evidence of interference. I hesitate to even write this but would be remiss in not sharing my initial findings… the plague shows signs of being man-made.

"There is a powder produced across the sea inflicting similar symptoms when inhaled or consumed. With your blessing, I will procure the powder and an alchemist familiar with it. My humble recommendation is that taste testers should be employed immediately and, while I would not dare to presume to tell you what to do, it might be time for gloves to make a fashionable return.

"Everything in my research shows that someone over decades, perhaps centuries, targeted the families of mages Talian, indicating a coordinated attack. I will continue my research and send my grandson to Tal as soon as I have answers.

"As always, your faithful servant, Lord Bersig."

I knew the picture on the back, a flower identical to those under the city.

Dimitri's voice had taken on a neutral tone as he recited the letter from memory, his words piercing the emptiness inside as if I heard them for the first time. Lord Bersig had not named anyone behind the plague that killed my mother and so many others. I owed it to everyone to tell. Should have handed over the letter a long time ago.

"Von—," I managed before the magic choked me.

I coughed and gasped.

The cell might stop magic from leaving, but I was still not free.

Dimitri leaned against the bars, watching the tears stream down my face.

"You had this all along, recognized the flower in the tunnels. Poisons might have a cure. You could have saved so many. Tell me how to heal them."

But I had no more words for him.

How had I ever imagined I could win in this game of royals and politics?

Like a leaf in a storm, Lumi and I had been tossed around by powers that did not even notice us. Maybe our mother had been targeted during the plague. Maybe she had been collateral damage.

I was no longer afraid for myself, there was nothing he could take from me anymore, and I had lived in fear for too long. Not caring was oddly liberating, doubly so when Flora's deranged laugh echoed down the tunnel.

Dimitri nodded and even without magic I felt the ice inside him grow, felt the trust we had built through shared truths and kisses crumble.

"You will be judged by the magistrate and Council. Duty ties my hands. The trial starts tomorrow." He squeezed his eyes shut, the mask cracking. For a moment, I thought he would take it all back, somehow rewind time and hurts.

"I only wanted to help."

The cold, unreadable face returned. "When the Goddess's gaze locks on you, you can only make the best of it." The Crown Prince of Tal retreated from the bars and me, joining the others and raised his voice. "It will, if nothing else, be quick."

The old man and unfamiliar noble nodded behind him. Then the prince and his retinue left, their steps echoing while I stared at the wall, his accusing eyes still digging into me.

Light steps returned.

Alone, Mariska leaned onto the bars much like her cousin had but there was none of the pained betrayal across her face. Instead, anger smoldered in her eyes.

"You shouldn't be here, laws be damned. No matter your name or origin, I call you *friend*."

I straightened under her fierce tone. "Friend? I have lied and lied again."

"And from what I heard you saved Dimi in Lowtown and then again on that bridge. You're not evil, no matter what else you did, you showed more bravery and grace in one season than most nobles do in a lifetime. My stupid cousin will see it too. Solovyova fears heart turners above all others and he always looked up to her so much. I should have warned you..."

Her fierce whisper was filled with a passion she only used when speaking of the prince. It was disconcerting to hear anyone talk so about me, a useless thief and now kin killer.

Her slim arms reached between the bars until they almost touched mine. It was my choice to close the distance. I had no right to friends. I had few defenses to my actions. First, it had all been about money—enough to settle a debt that my mother took on for me and Lumi. A debt I added to after abandoning her.

You could have run when you killed Kirill, a voice inside me argued. *Everyone expected you to.*

But I was done running.

The chains barely allowed me to press my fingertips to hers.

Power rushed into me, tingling through my skin, and healing the chafed wrists and aching muscles. I could not hold back the sigh of relief.

"Don't let them catch you here," I said. People died around me, they would arrest her as a conspirator or worse. "Go and live well. If you want to repay me, heal others, even those who can't afford it."

She scoffed. "I know my duty, and I know you. Not everything is as it seems. I told you once to give my cousin time—now give me some to make him see sense. Sleep well, friend."

Before I could tell her time was the last thing I had, she and her misplaced hope were gone.

Sleep did pull me under in the end, exhaustion taking its toll and leaving my dreams blissfully empty until the sound of slop hitting a metal plate woke me.

I ignored it.

Cold, infection, and starvation would not get me. My jailer had gleefully told me the trial started tomorrow and I had no doubt it would end with a sudden drop. Somewhere, Flora cheered. I imagined she knew of my fate and rejoiced in someone falling further than her.

Morovara, after surviving her daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughters, would soon prepare my body. I wished I had taken the time to get to know her. Wished I'd had time to build something to leave behind. Wished…

At least Ealhswip would not get my Spirit. Not that one more would matter as long as the plague fires burned. Perhaps on the Day of the Dead, Dimitri would join me in death, and I could explain the rest when the curse released me.

I had again survived magic overuse, lived through battle and too many near-death falls. In my bones, I knew I was not surviving this.

Lumi, I thought through the magic bond that should no longer exist. *I'm coming to you.*

Dimitri

The chair of skulls and roses had never been more uncomfortable and for the first time, I welcomed the distraction. Seven councilors and Bersig's grandson sat below ready to pass their judgement. Even as the court crier cleared his throat to read the charges, we all knew how it would end. Since von Uster and the bone soldiers, most minor nobles themselves, had seen hers and her sister's faces on the bridge, then the full court when we arrived at the palace, both her and Helia, there had been no stopping this even had I desired it.

If a curse could rewrite the previous days, I would have spent my last, but even the one I had used three years ago in hope to make those who hurt my child suffer as my loved ones had, had proven empty words. Perhaps the gods truly mocked us and after Tempest's sentencing, I would be the one to feel its effect, for I had surely considered her mine.

The shock of the necromancer's face after her mask was removed replayed every time my eyes involuntarily sought the woman below. Despite the betrayals and lies, I had to force myself not to carry her away from here. To protect her and kiss away the hurt furrowing her numb face. I had promised myself no one would ever hurt her, but could find no other path than forward, no matter how it would wreck us both.

She used her powers, I reminded myself for the thousand time, *it wasn't real*.

"For conspiracy against the Crown," the crier started, "the kidnapping of Helia von Heskin, Princess of Oberwalden"—who snorted audibly from the balcony above—"illegally using your magic on Dimitri Alexandre Ivanov, the first of his name, uncrowned King of Tal"—*seducing and playing him for a fool in his own palace—"*the former king, may his Spirit find peace, and several ladies of the court; stealing the queen's glass crown"—*she returned that*—"indiscriminate theft from the royal family"—*trinkets and information*—"and impersonating nobility." The court crier's intonation said this was the worst crime of all.

There was a dignity to Vanya Komarova as she heard the charges echoing through the mostly empty courtroom. Large parts of the events that led up to this moment were not public knowledge—would never be if I had any say in it—and thus the doors had been locked while this charade of justice continued.

Helia von Heskin, the real one, leaned over the railing of the upper balcony. From this distance, anyone could have mistaken her for Vanya or her sister. The Oberwaldian princess had insisted she attend the trial and I could hardly deny her, but her assessing eyes drove the full extent of my foolish hopes even deeper.

"Who offers evidence on behalf of the Crown?" the crier finished.

Von Lemerch stood. "I do."

As the head of the Council, she would present the letters and witness statements. If I had ever doubted how the Council would vote, the hateful looks she gave Vanya dissolved it.

My hands clenched on the ornamental skulls to prevent them from shaking as the letter from Lord Bersig was read again, and his grandson, Kazimir—broad-shouldered with unkempt blond locks and worn clothes despite the formal occasion—stood to confirm its provenance. After leaving the prison, I had gone directly to the hospital to question him at length, still wishing it an elaborate lie.

He had repeated again and again that his grandfather wrote the letter after years of study. When my father had not responded, Kazimir was sent to Tal for an audience. He had told me a dozen times how he traveled to Sorach and brought back the night powder after hearing its victims suffered similar to our plague-infected.

It was only when Nikolai, summoned by Mariska, arrived to vouch for Kazimir's trustworthiness—a long-time friend of his—that I was forced to accept the truth. She hid this for two months, watching the court fall apart as my father sickened, and as she comforted me afterward, she handed this information to the rebels.

Now came the letter in Vanya's own hand. It was clearly meant for me. Each word read before these men and women I hated

cut away another part of my heart. My eyes fixed on the witch who held the knife. She did not even look up.

"Dimi," it started, though she had never addressed me by my nickname. First, I had thought it a clue—had she written it under duress? Was it someone else's words planted on her? But no, enough samples of her handwriting had been analyzed and my scribes all agreed, this was hers.

"I can never tell you how sorry I am for my lies, but I will never regret the truths—that I care for you, that when we fight, I fly, that I do not wish to leave your side." Crossed out lines followed the opening, as if she had not known how to continue. The scribes had found nothing damning in there despite steaming the paper. Von Lemerch continued with the next clear word. "There are people who do not wish me at your side. They are willing to kill to not let the wedding happen. Even in the final moment, be on your guard."

The councilwoman frowned, as if she too could not make sense of Vanya's message. On the surface they were obvious platitudes. Of course, some objected to a foreigner becoming their queen. Then there was Eki—all the words could apply to her. Had Vanya known she pushed her before I told her? Or was she trying to say something more? When I found Tempest in the drink hall, she had insisted someone was trying to kill me.

Even in the final moment, be on your guard. With her, I had let it down. Now her own words would remind me never to do it again.

It finished with, "I have never seen Oberwalden. You do not know me. I'm sorry I could not even tell you my name."

At this, she finally met my eyes and *she*—Vanya, Tempest, my princess—was nowhere in her blank look. Like she was already dead.

Von Lemerch read my own statement. The formal language described how Vanya had impersonated Helia von Heskin, gaining access to the palace and Women's Tower—when Helia returned, these questions had been inevitable. The rest was not, but there had been too many questions from too-important people for me to say nothing.

In as few words as possible, I outlined how she attempted to steal the glass crown and I caught her. It did not mention kisses and late-night conversations. Nor did it mention anything of what happened after she left the palace, beyond her leading me into an ambush. As von Lemerch moved on to Helia's equally stilted words, I tuned out, unable to bear it any longer. Every true word felt like a lie.

Who had made Vanya do this? Had they forced her to kiss me? Whose lies had it been we acted out together? It felt like the mud of the Taliell covered my insides, each thought fighting against the sludge of self-recrimination, betrayal, and shame. She had led but I had followed—and someone else had pulled both of our strings.

I had decided I might be able to rule Tal and now everyone who mattered knew me for a fool, turned by any pretty face. And magic—Solovyova had already given a long lecture on consorting with a witch and had her water seer check for residual effects. Nothing she had done had made me able to draw a full breath of air or loosened the vice around my heart.

After my father killed my child and exiled me, I had nothing to do besides obsessing. The guards at the keep between Oberwalden and Tal my father sent me to avoided me and I sought only Cherny's company. Despite the cold, I had been unable to light a fire without the darkness inside rising and my body locking up to keep in the screams. This betrayal and loss felt different and the sudden duties of ruling even before my coronation left me few moments to feel. Instead, the pressure inside grew until I looked at Vanya again and everything stilled. I had promised to protect her—Mariska did not let me forget it—but what did protection look like when every road led to death?

More testimonies were presented, servants and guards, my mother and grandmother, even Flora von Heskin interviewed still in her cell as if her word carried weight. One of the advantages of being the uncrowned king was that I had received copies of all the witness statements beforehand. Once someone started to unravel the mystery that was Vanya, the case for her death was undisputable.

I clenched my jaw until I feared a tooth would crack. Air flowed like syrup. If I overrode the Council's unavoidable sentence, they would think me still under her magic, and perhaps I would be. Wearing the crown of Tal was supposed to mean hard decisions. If I pardoned her, they would kill her to save me. This was the only way to protect her—something I should not even want to do.

"The Council has heard all evidence," von Lemerch said, returning me to the present. "Does anyone wish to speak on behalf of the defendant?"

Couriers and Council members exchanged silent looks. Mariska would have spoken had I not ordered her locked in her rooms. She had argued even though I told her it was meaningless. Nikolai, for once acting like the concerned older brother, was watching over her.

The court crier cleared his throat. "The uncrowned King has placed his trust in the Council, asking them to determine the accused's guilt. If the Crown's case has swayed you, stand."

Von Lemerch had not even bothered sitting after presenting the evidence. One by one, the others rose.

Sophina Dorova cast me a coy look as she stood. If she voted to kill my son over a childhood rivalry with Eki, hanging Vanya was nothing.

Mar Heridan was next—another person on my list. I nodded to him, listing the bones I wished I could break.

Savva Novikov, Castle Osipova, Urs von Uster, and Forentiy Makarov followed. Kazimir Bersigov, attending on behalf of the grandfather and whose name he took, gave me a searching look before joining the others, shaking his head. He had seen my desperation while questioning him. Seen the cold mask I had clung to while questioning her in the prison disintegrate.

"The vote is unanimous," the crier declared with obvious satisfaction. "Vanya Komarova of Lowtown, you are sentenced to be hung until dead."

The last word rang out through the high hall, and I watched Tempest, still in the flying leathers I had given her, for a reaction, a flinch, a sign of fear. There was nothing. Would I have seen the challenge I craved if she knew I still thought of her as the wind which tore through my life? Despite knowing her name and actions, I could not let Tempest go, for I could think of her no other way no matter how she hated me now.

The woman who I took to my bed, who laughed as she soared across the sky in my arms, who I had wished to run away with, was not the one standing before me. *Because she had not been real*, I reminded myself for the thousandth time. *They studied me and crafted her persona, using her power to reinforce the illusion. They made me lose myself around her, forgetting revenge and duty both.*

Let her go, the voice inside said again. *She was never meant for you.*

I forced my clenched fists to relax. Unable to stay a moment longer, I left without a word through the private door behind the podium. It closed with finality.

It was done.

I'd been raised to rule but had no idea how to carry the responsibility. Despite my decisions two months ago already resulting in fire and death, I knew this was the moment I would carry with me. The one that might break me before I even wore the glass crown.

In the private meeting chamber, I collapsed, staring into nothingness. Tal needed me. The clans had not responded to the coronation invites, Denyev had declared open rebellion upon hearing of my father's death, and the Talians were not far behind. I had already ordered the prison emptied of anyone held only for dissent or without evidence. It did not matter, for more were brought in each day on proven charges of violence.

I pulled out my new journal, the old one lost in the tunnels, and could not stop myself from tracing her clenched jaw and deadened eyes. Perhaps when all the images had poured onto the crisp paper, I could forget.

The door swung open again and Helia marched inside as if she was already queen. She settled opposite me and pushed her glasses back up. The same dark hair and same nose as Vanya and her twin sister mocked me. Slightly taller and plumper, she looked more like their country cousin than the real princess. After staring while trying not to stare at Vanya for the last five bells, meeting Helia's gaze took strength I had not thought I still possessed.

She drummed the table, relaxed in the plush chair. "Why do the human dead stay here while the other animals go somewhere else? Where are the horse Spirits? The ants?"

"It's how it has always been. Maybe they go somewhere else, happier where there are no humans," I said distractedly.

"Or the gods doomed us to stay here, while the rest could pass on to the land of the dead."

I shook my head, in no mood to debate theology. Still, I engaged. It was that or allow the scream out. "I wouldn't blame the gods. If we're trapped here, it's probably due to our own stupidity."

"There seems to be enough stupidity to go around." Helia tapped her fingers on the table again, focusing her too-large, shrewd eyes on me. "Isn't it convenient for all involved in this mess she's a heart turner?"

"What?"

She looked at me like I was the village idiot before waving her hand. A wine bottle and two glasses flew over from the corner shelf. Deftly catching them, she filled them to the brim.

"You look like you need it. My uncle is a heart turner, a strong one, and while everything claimed is theoretically possible it would take a master pushed to her limits. A legendary talent, especially for a poor girl from Lowtown. Convenient for Aunt Flora to have someone to blame—after this we might have to let her out." Helia sipped her drink, smacking her lips in a most unladylike manner. "At least you have good wine."

"Flora von Heskin delivered testimony that mind powers were used to control her to deliver you to the Komarova sisters—I thought you would be happy your own family had been cleared. The verdict..."

"Death."

Helia stated it as if I could have forgotten. As if it could have been anything else.

I drained the wine. "Any of the crimes she committed would have carried the same sentence. They would kill her ten times over if the Goddess allowed it. Her Spirit will be forbidden from the temples, bones rejected from the Grove. The priestess will make sure of it."

Helia refilled my glass. "Bah, that girl doesn't deserve death. What proof is there of her being behind any of those things?"

"Her sister—"

She waved her hand in agreement, but as if it did not matter.

"I believe Lumi kept me alive and the only time she touched me it was most pleasant, but that is beside the point. Vanya is not

her sister. If I understand it correctly, Vanya even killed her."

I ran through the charges in my mind, and as she said, found little evidence for any besides the ones that hurt the most. The letter had been a confession to wrongdoings and lies without specifics. But I needed my anger to see this though. Needed to know there was no possibility of another future.

"She impersonated you. Took your life and was ready to marry me. It would have been for life, independent of her identity. She almost became Queen of Tal."

But she had confessed. *Only the night before Helia returned to the palace*, my voice of reason argued. Part of me had believed there was no way she could have predicted I would mistake her for Helia, but with mind magic…

The real Helia narrowed her eyes, and I stopped myself from fidgeting, though it felt like her magnified eyes could see the hurt boy abandoned again, and the black anger I was unable to release. I was a day away from becoming king, and a king did not throw tantrums. The person I was angry at did not even exist. A true Spirit of Lowtown.

Publicly, I had to pretend like nothing had happened, like she had not gotten under my skin, inside my very Spirit. The world needed to see me marry and it could never be *her*. This would be the end of us—and if anyone suspected I felt something besides the cold anger I'd shown, even my final desperate move would be for nothing. People were moving in the shadows while the nobles watched like griffons ready to tear into my flesh.

"I'm not the princess you want," Helia said, echoing my thoughts.

"You're the only princess," I retorted, anger finding its way to the surface.

She snorted again and I tried to regain my calm. That was not what any woman deserved to hear, especially not one who had been kidnapped upon entering her future husband's city.

"I'm agreeing to your outrageous plan to deceive everyone." Helia drummed the table in consideration. "We don't marry, but let those puppets out there believe we did until it suits us."

I emptied the wine glass again. How I would have rejoiced at those words a three-day ago. Anything had seemed possible then. Now, Tempest and hope of happiness would be dead and gone before midday tomorrow. Still, I would pretend to marry to solidify the rule I had planned to abandon.

I could not pinpoint when my priorities changed—while arguing with Tempest and Alexei, when standing against the fire, when trying to similarly stand up to my father? Or was it later over games in a run-down drink hall and on rioting streets? In tunnels under my city or on discarded clothes in a basement? One thing was sure, I was not leaving Tal to the undead and my grandmother's dark predictions. If only I could stop seeing another woman's face every time I looked upon my bride.

"So we marry. What in this whole mess convinced you?"

Helia considered me before answering. "I might not have told you everything. While I was unconscious some things drifted in like dreams. I remember Lumi opening up to me—I think she was lonely—and as I was unresponsive maybe she was really talking to herself"—Helia gave me a shrewd look, but didn't pause—"she didn't know everything that was going on, and I believe she was being strong-armed into some of it. She really did hate you, hated all of Tal's upper class, but it was not her idea to send her sister into the palace. She thought you would instantly see through the ruse and kill her, or her sister's impulsivity would get her killed.

"Lumi said she hadn't been working for Tal to get out from under the royals' thumb only to get squashed under someone else's hand. She wanted Tal to rise up—to demand representation and protection. Lumi fought for equality."

"She tried to kill me for equality? Did you know she was a death keeper?"

Helia shrugged. If she had talked earlier, would I still have walked into the trap?

"I only knew for sure that she could wake me. I assumed she was a healer with very soft lips—so you weren't the only one who was tricked by the Komarova sisters."

Helia finished her own wine and poured us more. What a match we were.

"And if you cannot leave Tal after wearing the crown?"

Her fingers hovered over the table as thoughts I could not read flittered behind too-familiar green eyes. Then she nodded to herself. "Then we figure it out or give it to someone else. As you said previously, by then we're in charge."

Despite the situation, my lip twitched. Seemed through this mess, I might have made a friend. No matter who she looked like, who she was not, there were much worse people to be tied to.

"Anything else you overheard?" I said. "Did the sister know where the missing food was or where the undead came from?" *Had she been behind the walking dead?*

"It was very important that you married someone they could control this year, that's what she kept saying, though I don't think she knew why. So, we pretend to marry. Sometimes you must dangle a rat to get the cat. Even the letter from your princess said they would try to stop the wedding."

Helia's smile cut like a knife. It was *her* smile.

Fake, I reminded myself yet again, *it had all been a game and I won.* I had never felt more like I had lost, but if I believed anything else, I would not be able to play out this final move.

Keeping my face blank, I emptied the replenished glass and wondered what god I had offended.

Tomorrow would come, better or not. The Council had pushed for a quick trial, arguing the longer this went on the more the truth would slip out. The people would not follow a king controlled by a witch, nor a queen they could not believe was real.

Tomorrow held my father's funeral and my coronation. In Tal, one king was given to the Goddess as another one rose. They had preserved my father's body long enough.

Vanya and Ivan Gregorious III would be sent off at the same time. One the priestesses would ask the Goddess to embrace, the other to reject, and in my heart, I wished them exchanged.

What would Alexei, who had encouraged me to open to her, say about this? Would he laugh and curse? Would he stand silently by my side? Grin and find a way to fix it all?

Even von Uster had not been able to find his bones. At my request, the priestesses had anyway chanted the Goddess's blessing. I had yet to even go to the temples to pray for his Spirit yet. That was another part of my own city where I could not step foot before I found all the answers. Morovara would bless my father's Spirit as his bones were separated from his flesh. Would she, like all others, offer only lies?

That evening, as Helia and I rode through Tal, people lined Palace Road, climbed the houses, and hung out of windows. Some cheered. Some cursed. Too many silently watched their future king and queen.

A skeletal figure of blood covered the palace sigils as I returned.

Death was everywhere and too soon I would wear the glass crown, tying myself to Tal.

Vanya

The dregs of defiance still inside kept my face impassive as von Lemerch stared down on me. While other counselors watched the court crier, she focused on me. Even if I had wanted to speak out in my defense, under her eyes, I could feel the curse's hands on my throat.

Here, in daylight among the nobility, it was near impossible to think of her as the undead divine ruler who once married Herebov. I understood why Lumi had laughed in my face when I told her of my suspicion. Would Ealhswip, after defying death, spend her time on the Talian Council? But the part of me that refused to bend, argued it was the perfect cover if she wanted to take over without killing everyone. Lacking a king and with the Temple's support, many nobles might have followed her—not to mention the commoners. And for those who did not, she had the undead. Why did she even wait for the Day of the Dead?

Her menacing eyes traveled up and to the side. I could not help but follow. Since being led into the courthouse from the windowless prison coach, I had avoided the black chair of bones and roses, and the man who sat upon it.

Dimitri's face was as cold as the first time I saw him when he rode into Tal on Cherny. Always at court, his black hair had been braided back. Today, it stood disheveled as if he no longer cared to follow the current fashion. Like how it had been when he abandoned me on the steppe. When he dropped me after seeing my sister's corpse.

Our eyes met.

Deep inside me an ember became a flame, struggling to pierce the emptiness of death. Once, I likened his grief to a sea—now my own river of tears flowed invisibly, drowning what had been between us.

Death.

The word, echoing in the nearly empty courtroom, was a slap against my numb mind. Not that I had not repeated it often enough in my mind since I saw Lumi's face.

Dimitri responded with only a nod before marching from the room without another look in my direction.

Someone moved in the gallery above.

Helia von Heskin, alive and well. From this distance she could have been my sister. I hoped Ealhswip secretly seethed at the prince and princess together.

Helia left after Dimitri. Had they been here to ensure themselves that I would be killed? To hear the charges leveled against me?

The Council continued talking for a while longer, signing my sentence onto innumerable papers to make it legal.

Ealhswip ignored them and when my jailer led me off the dais, through the back, and into cells below the courthouse, she followed.

I sank onto the hard bed bolted to the wall. At least this place was warm and not underground. A place for those who would die too soon to justify the effort to bring the condemned back to the city prison in Gateways.

Shimmering sigils ran the length of the bars stretching from ceiling to floor, blocking the powers I had never desired.

In the prison, it had been as if I never had magic, here it shifted under the surface, limited but not gone. People moved on the floor above us, the guards who brought me settled further down the hall. Ealhswip's dead presence approached.

Expressionless, I watched her as she glided across the floor, the cane a useless prop in her hand. She had hired me to steal the crown, then seized the opportunity when the prince mistook me for his bride—though that might have been the plan from the start. She had used me to kill the king. Had poisoned hundreds, perhaps thousands.

She stopped, stretching tall above me, every inch the noble woman, but now that I knew what hid under her skin, I could see the cracks. Her movements were too smooth, the skin so thin I could see bones and veins.

"The crown isn't where you said you left it," she said, regarding me. Her gray eyes flashed blue.

Ah, they still needed something from me. Too damn bad they had nothing else to threaten me with. I was already dead.

I laughed, a broken sound too like my mother's final rattlings.

Ealhswip's presence pressed against me, and my suppressed magic rose in response until each breath was a struggle.

The blue flames in her eyes expanded to cover the whites.

"You think we have taken everything from you. You still have your Spirit, little girl. No matter what they say, it will be free when you die. Unless I say otherwise." The voice layered, as if two beings spoke at once. "Give me the crown."

She attacked my mental walls with freezing pain and terror, but nothing could compare to Lumi's death, and while pain laced my mind, my stubborn death-defying core held. I was not letting this creature into my mind. I had lived in death's shadow my entire life. There was no more fear.

I did not try to get away as darkness ate at my vision and desperation clawed inside me until I only saw burning blue flames. All my life I had tried to run—away or somewhere new. To move and dance and fly. Perhaps for the first time, I was completely still on the outside while my mind fought.

Lumi had always been a razor blade, cutting through the world. I had thought she was meant for building and business, ignoring her own plans. If I could be as cold as her, perhaps I could still make a difference.

"The Taliell," I gasped. "I hid it among the stones where it runs through the palace grounds." By the time they discovered my lie, I would be dead. Let her try to get the answers from my Spirit.

She pursed her lips, clearly unhappy, but the pressure lessened, and the eyes returned to human.

"Reckless, but we knew that." She tapped her cane on the stone floor. "How you stumbled through the steps. Stupid small-minded creature, thinking the innate magic flowing through your veins might offer you a little protection." She shook her head. "You von Heskin girls think yourself clever. Your sister tried to work against us, and for that you killed her. Helia fumbles through the dark. She wanted to break the engagement. Seems your actions changed her mind. You three will be remembered as the fools who gave us the living. On the Day of the Dead, Tal will return to where it belongs. The royals stole and then forgot. Maybe I'll capture your Spirit after the hanging tomorrow. That way you can witness it all."

"I didn't ask for any of this," I spit out. "And I'm no von Heskin."

"None of us ever does. What is started must finish. They could have left Tal alone, now the dead will reclaim it." Her eyes flashed. "Herebov's descendants will die, as will all mages who stand in my way. Never again will I be chained."

For a moment, her back straightened, gray hair darkened, and skin smoothed. A beauty with vengeance in her eyes stood in the doorway. Then she leaned on the cane, and the illusion broke.

I stood at the bars, no longer afraid. "Dimitri also thought revenge was the answer. All it brings is death."

"I'm not changing the past. I'm saving the future."

She threw something at me. Reflexively catching it, I found myself staring at Dimitri's notebook. The soft blue leather was strained, pages smudged.

"Why?" I asked, remembering him giving the book to me when the undead charged us in the tunnels.

Ealhswip smiled. "You had him, silly girl. If your sister had stayed out of it and you not made such a spectacle of yourself, he would have married you. Perhaps I would even have let you live for such an achievement. Nothing brings someone to their knees like heartbreak and betrayal—as you through your death seem to have delivered that to Herebov's heir, you deserve a reward."

She laughed again as she left, a joyous sound. The sound of victory.

Part of me wanted to obsess over her every word, then read each of Dimitri's no matter how they cut, but the cold lethargy returned. What would I do with any insights?

The guards brought me water but no food, to minimize the cleanup after I loosened my bowels in death, they explained. I thought I recognized one from the night I first escaped the palace. He had been kind to a hurt girl. None of that softness remained for a traitor.

No more visitors came. The guards changed. They kept their distance, hands gloved to avoid touching me. Hope I'd not known still lived inside me withered. No matter what my mind said, my heart had still expected Dimitri to come—to save me or say goodbye, to curse me or demand more answers. He felt close, like if I turned a corner he would be there. Perhaps he still sat somewhere in the building doing whatever kings did.

Unable to sleep, unable to think, I flipped open the first page, knowing it would give me no peace. Ealhswip had wanted me to read it. She had known I would be unable to resist.

Year 299, 6th month, 8th three-day stood on top in the same neat letters as his maps—four days before I met him. He had started the notebook the day he returned to Tal. One day before mine and Lumi's fateful robbery.

Tal stinks more than I remembered. Three years of longing to be called back and now I cannot stand it. How they pressed against the Guard, barely dressed in rags, shouting as if they mattered to me. What lies had Father told in my absence? At least Palace Road is wide, and no one touched me.

He even painted my rooms like flames. Placed the foreign girl's picture on my mantel. Ordered his servants to follow me around—all instantly dismissed. How much of a fool does he still think me? Then he summoned me, as if I needed more than his letter. An engagement ball without a bride?

The crown and the power that came with it. Head of House Herebov. I'll do anything for it. Be anyone. Kill if needed. Marry—if the von Heskin ever arrives.

It continued more of the same, part rant, part thoughts, possibly so pressing he had to put them to paper to get them out. None of it flattering, though it painted a very different picture to the man I met and teased from the start. Had Ealhswip given me this so that I could see how he viewed me? Lumi and I had been part of the common masses watching him ride into Tal.

An ink blotched sketch covered the opposite page. The black jagged lines made no sense until I turned it sideways. Squinting in the low light I recognized the sharp-angled structure of Morovara's ziggurat, then the diffuse trees of the Bone Grove, their sinuous shapes transforming into houses by the end of the page. He had drawn Tal like I never saw it before—threatening, overwhelming. The ink ready to run over the page, like he had spilled it though it had not seeped through the paper.

It was darkness and grief and despair.

Flipping further, I froze. A woman's face covered the page, her hair wild, eyes stormy, and lips parted as if asking for a kiss. I had never seen myself like this—desirable, wanton, breathtaking—still, I recognized it as the night we met. He had captured the moment with the skill of a master, but it was the emotion laid bare on the page that made my heart stutter.

I slammed the book closed.

He watched from a throne today as his Council condemned me. I would not spend my last moments grieving for him. I would not read more of his thoughts. My treacherous fingers clenched around the supple leather, despite my mind telling them to let it all go. Ealhswip had seen me broken and desired to fuse something together before the hanging—to bring me to life so that she could watch my death.

Using the book as a pillow, I lay down, refusing to *want*.

This was it. I was done.

Mother, I tried to be kind and true.

Somewhere inside me, she sang softly of dragons and flowers, of life and rain.

My mind drifted to Lumi and me as girls, how we told each other everything as we snuck away to watch the stars, how once we thought Mother only beautiful and knew none of the cost. We dressed up in her clothes when she was away, not understanding that they were costumes to make rich men part with their money. That her visitors were customers, not great romances. *Had our father been any different?*

Then how two years ago, I rushed home *knowing* Lumi was hurt. The spring floods had been tearing through Tal, Rivertown knee-deep in water and Lowtown almost as bad. Only one barge had remained open, partying through the torrents. Behind a curtain of rain, Stone and I shyly undressed each other. We had flirted through winter and thought it love. His mother owned another barge and his offer of free food and drink had seemed the truest proof of his feelings.

I never saw him again after that night.

Half dressed, I'd felt my sister disappear and a terror as cold as the deluge.

I had braved the weather, imagining her drowned in the torrents or bleeding out in an alley. Returning drenched and exhausted to Kirill's, I found her unconscious in the courtyard, the skin on her face flapping open, lip split in two. The rest of her was blue with cold and bruises. The following morning, she had been too hot, delirious, and raging about death. I'd gone to Kirill and added to our debts, money we would never be able to pay back, because Popova was not cheap even for damaged girls.

When Lumi returned from the apothecary, I did not question her distance. Healing the body was not the same as healing the mind. Instead of talking, secrets had grown like weeds, pushing us apart. She never told me what happened that night. Now she never would.

Exhaustion and dreams interlaced with memories opened my mind, and despite the sigiled bars, magic slipped out to carry notes of life back to me. It found the guards, tired but alert, then the crowd on Palace Road, already preparing for King's Change—the three-day-long funeral and coronation celebration.

It sang of a city of color, of life brighter because death was never forgotten. There was anger, but not the oppressive terror of the drawing in Dimitri's journal. Notes spiraled high, carrying me until I flew without movement. A tornado like those on the steppes, promising only change in its wake.

Then there it was.

The bond.

Impossible and beautiful. *Lumi*.

I jolted awake, sitting up.

A memory—*it must have been a memory*—because I could not sense the dead, and in death we were all interchangeable. Everyone in Tal knew that Spirits retained nothing of who they had been in life. Despite what Ealhswip did to the dead, I had to believe that, so even if I could feel the dead, I would not be able to find Lumi. She was gone. They had surely burned her body and given her ashes to the mountain winds by now.

The sigils on the bars shone green like her eyes.

Reaching again, I found nothing.

The foolish hope, like an animal beaten and abandoned, shivered inside.

I did not sleep again.

Watching the minutes on the mechanical marvel Dimitri had left me with tick toward my death, the darkness pressed down. Only once did I flip it over and followed the red needle with my eyes as if I could pierce stone and find the palace.

Could I not dismiss him from my heart because he placed one of his three mage curses on me? Had he twisted me as he accused me of twisting him? Or was this hurtful, haunting, burning thing *love*?

As I had known, this was too late for realizations.

They came when the sun shone in through the window at the end of the hallway. Four guards I did not recognize and Koshka, perhaps here to report back to my prince. Maybe carry away my last words if I had had any. Perhaps to mock me by surviving impossible odds.

The sun did not yet reach the walled courtyard where the hangman's noose hung from a white tree, the same kind that grew in the Bone Grove. Maybe it would chain my Spirit with the other condemned killed here, then Ealhswip could come and collect it at her leisure.

Fear crept through the numbness. I pushed it back.

Lumi would not have balked from stepping up the wooden platform. I would keep my composure for both of us.

Each step was a mountain to conquer. My body refused to approach the gently swinging rope, like it knew this was an animal intending harm. Survival is the strongest instinct we have. You do not decide to pull your hand from a flame before it's burned. The body protects itself.

The shaking started in my hands. I clenched them tight as I reached the final step. My knees locked.

"Goddess, bless me on my way," I whispered. "Let my Spirit rattle my bones. Let my life be changed. Let me rest in Tal."

Koshka placed a hand on my back, steering me to the trapdoor at the center. Did she blame me for leading her into the tunnels? For abandoning her or forcing her will? That night, she had laughed with me and joked with Yahontov. Today, she was killing me and though there was sympathy in her eyes, she did not seem too bothered by it.

She placed the coarse rope around my neck and pulled it until I could barely swallow. With a nod to someone behind me, she stepped back.

Months of fearing suffocation returned with panic like that of the man on the bridge. I imagined someone reaching for me, like I had him, sharing hope as if it could stop the inevitable.

Ealhswip and Gennady, the royal healer who once lectured me on magic use, stood to the side of the platform, the female scribe from yesterday seated beside them to document the judgment carried out. The old healer met my eyes, and I remembered his sigh as I ignored his words about seeking help. Today, his face showed only compassion. They could have sent a lesser healer to confirm my death. Having the royal one here was a privilege I did not want. A reminder of who I, for a short time, had been.

The wind rustled the leaves. The sun hit my eyes. On my exhale, I closed them. I wanted to think of Lumi, of our mother who had been murdered as I murdered the king; instead, I only saw Dimitri's judgmental face. The heart-held hope that'd believed he would save me, had loved me, died.

Anger wrapped itself around my heart.

I had killed for him.

Loved him.

"Pull!"

The floor fell away. The noose tightened.

In desperation, I yanked my still-chained hands and kicked my legs. Pain tore through my neck. Stars danced behind my eyes. My lungs burned.

Opening and closing my mouth, my body fought to draw breath, fought to survive even though the mind knew it was too late.

I exploded outward, my power searching for someone to save me.

Lumi's hands enveloped mine.

Calm filled me. I had sworn I was done running. There was no other way this could have ended.

Finally, the hope escaped my chest, finding no more purchase. Perhaps it could help someone else.

Tomorrow will be a better day, our mother whispered in my ear as I let go.

Dimitri

One king died, one ascended. One princess hanged, and another prepared to become queen. Three years ago, my father killed my infant son and told me I was too soft to wear the glass crown. He had been right.

My child was gone. My best friend was gone. My father was gone. The woman I could have, might have, and should not have loved was gone.

Instead of succumbing to the cold that had wrapped around me the last three years, I wanted to howl like an animal in pain. To grieve the loss of what I had not known I needed; for one perfect moment, I'd thought it mine. If today went wrong—

No.

Earth and stone pressed down, and the musty air tried to fill my aching lungs as I strode as third in line down the steps deep under the Women's Tower. It felt like my own tomb, not my father's.

The stillness suffocated me, like my pretend princess would be on the other side of Tal. The Council had made its decision, but I had signed the papers. Preemptively, some might think. For a few bells yet, I was an uncrowned king.

As Mariska arrived late to take her designated place in the family procession, there had been no time for words. Even if I had to break tradition, I had to speak to her before she left. For my prayer to the Wishmaker and Death Goddess both, I needed her to listen.

As was her right as our matriarch, Solovyova led the procession. The city might soon belong to me, but the Women's Tower had its own laws.

After the coronation, I would be the only grown male allowed inside the Tower—outside royal funerals—but I would still have to obey her rules. My mother followed Solovyova, as was her right as the wife of the deceased. Behind me came the rest of our family and Morovara. The coronation would be a public event, as would the hanging of the king's bones on the next three-day. The crypt walk and preparation of the body was private.

Solovyova inched blindly down the worn stone steps, but every time I reached past my mother to help, she shooed me away as if I was still a child begging for sweets.

Mage lights hovered above Mariska and me, and behind me, Nikolai's and Morovara's cast their own shadows. My grandmother, Uncle Rada, and my mother lacked either the magic or skill to light their own. Once, this journey would have been as bright as day, the magic strong in our blood. Now, the royal family could barely manage to not trip in the dark. Vanya, an untrained Lowtown girl, had lit my chambers without trying. No wonder, I had not questioned her lineage.

I truly did not know my people.

Had she crafted these feelings to make me forget my duties and bring me closer to her sister's cause before taking it too far? Like everyone else, had she used me for my rank and never seen me at all?

Outside, the sun would be rising, and she would hang. Descending into the dark, I questioned all my decisions and sought any other way than what was in motion. Went through all the things that could go wrong.

I could not wait any longer.

Pressing against the rock wall, I pulled my surprised uncle and then Nikolai ahead of me and squeezed in next to Mariska. Morovara walked last, and I felt her too-perceptive eyes on my back as I heard my uncle grumble ahead. But I was about to become king and only Solovyova, too far ahead to notice the breach in tradition, would have challenged me openly.

"I have nothing to say to you," Mariska hissed, speeding her steps to pass me.

I grabbed her arm, pulling her close enough that hopefully our voices did not carry. "Hate me if you want to. I'm sure *she* does. But you must listen."

She turned to me with rage such as I had not seen in my cheerful cousin before. Her red-rimmed eyes shone with fury. "You're the one who should have listened. I told you Vanya wasn't evil. I told you in the hospital she only did what she had to

because—"

"You told me I shouldn't push her. I didn't. Don't think I don't want this."

"But you're doing it. She genuinely cares for you, has been cursed and killed h—and you are hanging her. If you really saw her, you would know she deserves better."

She pulled away from my slackening fingers. I had enjoyed Tempest's company too much to ask the right questions, and not because of her powers. I could lie to others, but here, in one of our holiest places, I would not lie to myself. Of course, she deserved better, but this was the best I could do. Perhaps someone cleverer…

We were almost all the way down when I grabbed Mariska's arm again to stop her from pushing past her brother. We were creating a scene, my uncle slowing his steps to overhear and the high priestess on my heels. I could not trust either.

As the crypt opened before us, I shut my mouth and pushed away the need to go to *her* and damn the world. I had prepared a note for Mariska in case I could not talk to her. Better to get this over with fast than delay it with argument. If Solovyova noticed me disrupting the ceremony, we could be here forever. If she heard me still care about a mind mage, she would have me examined. I was not king yet.

The oldest bones, those which did not fit on the trees, surrounded us in the chiseled stone coffins. White death masks covered the faces, onyx eyes glittering, ever watching as we passed.

The seven of us—my grandmother, mother, two cousins, uncle, the high priestess, and me—spread between the effigies and took our places around the open central stone basin where three hundred years of kings and queens had been prepared for their eternal vigils.

Here, I would marry Helia von Heskin in seven three-days, and we would swear our oaths before my ancestors. I would place the crown on her head and be bound until my own death or, hopefully, I passed the crown to my unfortunate successor. I had already started a mental list with von Uster at the top. The only things speaking against him were his age and that I suspected he would reject the offer. Gossip said if love rather than marriage ruled the crypt walk, he instead of my grandmother would have walked second after my grandfather's death. Or perhaps both would have gone together, as it was said the three had lived and loved together while my grandfather lived.

Our dead king—father, husband, brother, uncle, son—lay naked under a black cloth embroidered with golden bones and roses. Griffons marked the corners, their talons carved ivory. Preservation sigils ensured my father's body had barely changed since he took his last breath. I knew this and still, the wrinkles seemed deeper, the permanent frown when he looked in my direction prominent. He would never see the harbors of Mjors. I would never know if he would have tried.

When I thought him dead as he first sickened, there had been grief. This time, the duty of becoming king, the decisions and chaos in the world above, left little room for other emotions. If he had still been alive, we would have argued. He would have blamed me for not solving the issue of the impostor privately. Then cracked down on Tal until the food was found and citizens learned a revolt against the Crown would be met by swift death.

Or perhaps he would have surprised me. What did I know of ruling? Despite despising most of them, I had followed the Council's every recommendation so far.

In spite of our heated words, Mariska's hand slid into mine, and I realized the high priestess was talking. Morovara raised an urn that looked too heavy for her aged muscles above my father's head. The scurrying and crackling I previously tuned out grew. She must have opened the lid.

My mother's face held little grief, but my grandmother's softened, tears gleaming in her milky eyes. Ivan, King of Tal, had once been Yanko, a boy I could not imagine. Did she see him when Morovara poured the black beetles into the basin?

My own child had never had the honor of being prepared and hung. The wind would never play his bones and calm his Spirit.

The high priestess placed the white death mask—so similar to the one Tempest's sister wore when she attacked—over my father's face, protecting us from the beetles' consumption. There was no escaping the *click, click, click* of their movement. Once they were done, the bones would be dipped in melted gold—never to rust or break—then strung together and hung on the following three-day.

The high priestess's voice rose in song, calling the Goddess to watch over the dead and turn away from the rest of those gathered.

We added our own voices—badly—to hers.

Was Vanya walking to the hangman at this moment? There was no way to tell the time. Pain entered my voice. Did she have anyone to call the Goddess for her? She had betrayed, fooled, and used me; that did not remove the emotions I wished to forget. I had protected her the only way I knew how.

One good deed does not erase a crime, the head of the Council had said when I explained in private how Vanya saved us on Dragon Bridge. According to Von Lemerch, someone cold-blooded enough to kill her own sister was surely capable of everything she was accused of.

I blinked the involuntary tears from my eyes as the last tone rang out.

The royals of Tal stood, unsure how to proceed. There was nothing more to be done down here. I needed to talk to the high

priestess about the missing food and priestesses who seemed to control the undead, but Mariska had to come first. Above, the three-day coronation celebration and feast honoring my father would have started.

Nikolai, a man who used social niceties like a blade and always seemed at ease, was the first to step back.

"There's a party waiting." He paused to nod at me. There was no grief in his eyes. "I'll raise a glass for you, Cousin."

His and Mariska's father, Rada, who spent most of the last decade on their family's country estate, followed with mumbled wishes for health. The royal family was not much for public shows of emotion—even in this private setting. Mariska avoided my look and discreet plea to remain.

Before she reached the stairs, I hurriedly pressed a note into her hand and whispered, "I might be blind but did listen, just not like you wanted me to. If you trust me at all, go there now. Hurry and you'll understand. *Please*."

This plan had too many pieces and I too little time. Since my father's death, I had been watched every moment. Vanya's rude stepsister and Mariska must each do their parts and von Uster needed to be as loyal to the Crown as he claimed. Koshka, who surely must have the Goddess herself looking out for her, had to be trustworthy despite her grief. The alternative was unacceptable.

I cleared my face as I turned to Morovara. Instead, my grandmother waved me toward the furthest wall of the crypt.

The dark, horned feminine face portrayed on the wall sent shivers down my spine. No one depicted the Goddess unless they wished to draw her attention. I could not guess why my ancestors had. Perhaps it predated even them.

Solovyova's fingers hovered over the sigil-surrounded image, as if she addressed the Death Goddess instead of me. "Are you marrying the von Heskin girl? The new one?"

"I'm making the arrangements," I said, unable to lie before my ancestors and the Goddess herself.

"This is what it means to be king of Tal." Solovyova's knuckle touched the wall. She lowered her voice. "This is our secret and curse."

"We're cursed?" Her warnings were usually less direct.

"Curses are blessings used maliciously. Wishes so strong even the gods must listen."

The light had dwindled as the others left. My mother remained watching the beetles consuming her husband, Morovara next to her. No one was listening, still Solovyova waved me to bend down until our cheeks touched.

"Herebov started it all. Tal was already ancient and growing steadily. He wasn't king yet, but a powerful mage, head of one of the clans living on the steppe. A proud man thinking himself in need of a wife, despite already having a woman and children."

"I know my history."

"Then he met Ealhswip," Solovyova continued as if I had not spoken. "The High Priestess and divine ruler of Tal. Some stories say that she used magic to seduce him, making him powerless before her, others that he loved her like a man loves a woman, but some whisper he claimed her without consent, stealing her power. Either way, they married in the old way, tying themselves together with magic, and he became the first king of Tal."

"Then she died, he married Yelena—whom you're named after—and started our line," I supplied, needing to get to the point before Morovara left.

Solovyova scoffed. "Pay attention. Yes, she died. Some said he was so heartbroken by her death that he went into the realm of the dead and brought her back, others that he killed her, and she returned for revenge. Most said, he should have stayed away from Tal. Either way, the balance was broken. *Others* came through."

"The Spirits?"

She shook her head. "They always came to Tal before passing through the Gate, but they weren't alone on the other side. Dark things came out of the shadows."

"And then?"

"The royal children did something utterly foolish," Morovara said, and I spun to see her and my mother close enough to overhear.

"They did what they needed to do," Solovyova snapped. "Herebov was dead, the tribes didn't want to stay in Tal and peace was needed."

"This happened three hundred years ago?" I asked, unsure how to handle the rising tempers from the two most powerful women in Tal.

"Two hundred ninety-nine," Morovara said, her eyes locked on the Goddess's chiseled face. "If you allowed me access to the Blessed Gate, perhaps we could stop it from getting to three hundred."

Solovyova glared at her. "It's time for you to leave. We're the guardians of the Gate and it will remain locked."

The high priestess shook her head. "I couldn't do anything without the keys and your cooperation anyway. The history books say they made a blood oath. If I could examine it, perhaps I could ease the Spirits' distress."

"They're dead. Distress is for the living." Solovyova nodded to my mother. "Take the High Priestess upstairs. Her work here is done."

Morovara sighed, pulled her dignity around her like a robe, and stepped away. "I'm not your enemy, but you fool yourself if

you cannot feel things coming to a head. Tal is rising."

"Where's the missing food from the steppes?" I called after her. "Who's behind the Spirit of Lowtown? What does it mean that the Goddess will walk again?"

Morovara halted on the stairs. "If you need to ask, we're already too late. The past will play out again. Make sure you choose better than your ancestor who'll wear the crown."

Before I could respond, she disappeared up the steps, my mother hurrying after.

The undead moved behind my eyes, the bloody skeleton on the priestesses' white robes shining.

The *click, click, click* of the beetles filled the crypt. Two mage lights barely larger than candle flames struggled to light the cavern.

"What's the Gate and why does she want it? What does the history have to do with my marriage?"

Solovyova tapped the wall again. "Herebov's sons cursed the Blessed Gate of the Dead below us, sealing the magic with two glass crowns. They wanted to ensure no one else came through. Since that day, the Spirits come to Tal but go no further. The priestesses sing and the bones play to keep them sedated. Morovara is a direct descendant of Herebov's first bride. She, like the high priestesses before her, wants access to the Gate."

My grandmother squeezed both my hands in hers.

"We have grown weak, the threat too far away, but our line is running out of magic. We cannot afford to change now. Marry a girl, I don't care which one as long as she has magic flowing in her veins, or you will be fighting a war you cannot imagine inside your own city. On the Day of the Dead the path opens. Make your wedding vows, they'll tie you both to the curse through the crowns. There are still rebels who fight to return to the old ways. Their unknown leader is back in Tal. When they make their move, we must be strong. Don't trust the Temple."

My heart hardened while my mind reeled at her words.

The woman I wanted would be hanging from a tree now, and instead of saying goodbye I remained here doing my duty.

Helia and I would swear to protect Tal. This was why my father had insisted on our marriage. This was why the king and queen were unable to stray far from Tal. *Was this why Vanya had stolen the glass crown?*

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

My grandmother patted my back. "Some things are meant for kings and queens. Your father would have told you before the coronation. He wasn't an easy boy, my son, but he knew his duty."

There was no reason to argue when all paths led to the same place. At least with Helia I would not have to stomach a wedding night dreaming of another. My future queen desired me even less than I did her.

Revenge. Love. Freedom.

My wants no longer mattered.

Three hundred years of expectations lay behind me, based on fact or not. Too often, beliefs matter more than reality. When Talians shouted *for all*, it meant dead and alive.

I squeezed Solovyova's hand. "The wedding planning never stopped. Helia will wear the crown." *The real one.* Hopefully she would still agree to the fake marriage after I shared what I'd just learned.

"Good boy. You'll be a good king." My grandmother turned back to my father's decimated body in the stone basin. "Go to your coronation celebration and leave me a bit longer with my dead."

"I'll wait."

In this place, she seemed closer to a Spirit than the force of nature she was above.

We stood there until the chill built a home in our bones, and I felt as close to death as my pretend princess undoubtedly was.

It was dark outside when we exited.

I carried Solovyova up the final flight. That she had accepted the indignity without a word worried me more than I could show. Her attendants took her from me, some daring to tell me off for keeping their lady too long in the cold. They should know, no matter how weakened, no one kept Solovyova anywhere she did not want to be.

As I walked away from the celebratory calls, children's laughter, and music in the Tower garden, even my somber mood lifted. During the Day of the Dead festival, Alexei, Eki, Mariska, and I had once moved from table to table, filching treats and drinks.

At twelve we had thought us almost adults. With only a year left in the Tower, time had seemed to be running out. Our whole world was changing. At that year's celebration, Alexei swiped a bottle of peach liquor. We hid among the trees, passing it around.

How sick we had been even before midnight and the Spirits arrival. To honor the dead, the sigils were disabled that one night by the Guild, and our ancestors entered the palace grounds. Not the Women's Tower itself, those sigils were too old and powerful, but through the gates on the first night of fall were the only time I saw the dead Tal was known for. They had seemed otherworldly.

My mother would calm me when I was small, telling me the dead can never hurt the living. How wrong she had been. Their touch lived inside me. Since the night on the bridge, their cold entered me every time I lay down to sleep. I twisted and turned,

knowing how close I had come to a death no one could fight.

If I had not forced myself to watch the necromancer's body burn, I could have convinced myself it was a setup for Vanya to ingratiate herself further—part of a larger plan I could not even guess at.

The eleventh bell rang.

I should hurry. They were surely looking for me, as the coronation would start at midnight—the traditional time of change—and last until dawn. If only I could fly away on Cherny and leave it all behind. But, through their convictions, Vanya and Alexei had forced me to accept I cared. I now knew the drink halls and barges of Tal, the night market, and the screams in Lowtown when the undead broke down their flimsy doors. Nikolai wanted the throne even less than I, and I could too well imagine what kind of king he would be.

At least I read the ordinances before I signed them. I wanted to do better. To get up again, if only I could stop falling.

I paused under the familiar trees, reluctant to rejoin the world. A soft step signaled I was not as alone as I had assumed. My emotions slid behind a king's formal face before I turned.

Ekaterina had paused five feet behind me. When our eyes met, she continued until we were close enough to feel each other's body heat. The point where touching seems inevitable, but a gulf remained. She was not seductive or coy; instead, her face matched mine.

Her waist-length, silky black hair was the same, her fine dress—red for luck and celebration—could have been one I excitedly stripped off her perfect body over three years ago. Only the caution in her eyes showed the passing time. I owed this woman more than I could ever repay her but wanted nothing to do with her, especially tonight. Not arresting her for hurting Vanya would have to be enough.

"Dimi," she said, her voice bringing back memories of passion and pain. "Tonight, you'll finally be king. Once, I dreamt of this day. Are you marrying the foreigner?"

"Eki—"

"First one plays you, then you take the next one. You promised to marry me. How many promises have you broken?"

Her hard tone cut through my excuses. As king, I could marry her, had promised to do so and avenge our son. The plague had robbed me of the revenge I planned for my father, impossible circumstances had stolen away another woman I'd, impossibly, lo—*No*.

Eki stood before me, face tense as if waiting for my judgement.

I could not bring myself to fight anymore. The world had broken both of us.

"You're right, I did promise. Eki, we were both kids. My father should never have done what he did, but we were also wrong." My voice softened. "You must stop. What you did to Vanya… You need help."

She seemed to deflate. "Then I know this is what you want. When you left, I sought my own revenge. Dimi, I'm also sorry, but it's not in the past. Enemies walk everywhere. I must do whatever I can for our child."

"He's gone, Eki. I cannot live for the dead when the living needs me. What—"

"Promise me you'll find me when you're king. There's someone you must meet, and I'll tell you everything I can. I'll trust no one until you wear the crown. Death is coming."

Eki marched away in a swish of skirts, on the outside, as perfect as she had ever been.

"What death?" I called after her. Death always came, especially in Tal.

Her words made no sense besides showing the insanity Mariska must have seen when telling me to talk to Ekatarina. Was there a chance she would hurt Helia like she had Vanya?

My guards waited for me outside the Tower. I sent one to guard the Oberwaldian princess. The others trailed my angry steps back to my new living space, where the sick smell of my father seemed to stick to the bedchamber no matter what anyone did. The little sleep I had gotten the previous days had been on the sofa.

Servants rushed in to dress me in gold and red, transforming me into someone else, while I did nothing.

Did Mariska listen? The undead had shown me death did not need to be the end, something I'd never thought possible.

I ruled a kingdom built on death's worship and it seemed to haunt my every step. Scripture said there must be death for life, and for once, I had started taking them literally, because there are some sins you live with, and others that wear you away until you are gone and a stranger stands in your place.

In a blood-red coat, heavy with onyx and gold, I strode down the stairs as the bell rang twelve times. Behind me, bone soldiers in ceremonial armor marched, then my family—the last of House Herebov after nearly three hundred years of rule. Together, we started the day greeting death, now we honored life.

I stepped through the packed amphitheater that normally held the three-day worship. Everyone I passed sank to their knees under the lantern lights.

Above, the bones swayed, the wind whispering its own greeting.

Morovara and my uncle—as the eldest man in my family—waited ahead with a glass crown that fractured the light. Colors played across the ancient surface and sigils.

The glass crowns could only sit on one head at a time. Until it touched my brow it belonged to my father. Or perhaps the

magic knew he had died and waited for another to feed the curse Solovyova spoke of.

I arrived and silence settled.

The wind stilled.

Morovara's eyes met mine as my uncle lifted the crown high.

"The one who wears the Crown of the Dead rules Tal. The one who wears the Crown of the Dead rules us all. The one who wears the Crown of the Dead is the Head of the House of Herebov."

Rada cut a thin line across my forehead, letting the blood drip down my face, then settled the glass crown on my brow, staining it red.

As he pressed his head to the ground, lightning charged through me. Magic flared inside me, while above, the wind furiously rattled the bones. A weight pressed down until I had to lock my knees. It sucked power through me. Consumed my Spirit. A great creature looked inside me and scoffed at what it found.

Then something snapped into place and the pressure eased.

"A king has been sent to the Goddess," Morovara intoned, her voice carrying in the sudden silence. "Another rises."

I faced the nobles and, like grass before the wind, they folded.

"For Tal!" they called.

I bowed to my citizens, answering, "For all."

The Sigil Guild master waited to the side, ready to adjust my noble's sigil. His magic surged through the lines, then it was done.

Until I gave it to another, the city and House belonged to me.

The first night of festivities passed in a blur of gift giving and people swearing their allegiance.

As the sun rose, I stepped out through the palace gates and the population of Tal greeted their new king.

There was no separating the joyous from angry cries.

My eyes sought Lowtown. There lay a woman I had thought I loved. One I had killed.

She had given me the strength to stand here. She had ripped my heart out of my chest, and I hoped to never get it back.

The untold masses' needs stole away my own wants. I was no longer Dimitri, a man with his own desires and dreams. I was the King of Tal, City of Bones and Roses.

The weight of the crown pressed me into the ground, tying me to something far below.

At least it would be returned to the treasury until the wedding, and then I never had to wear it again.

Duty had to be enough.

Vanya

Death was not lonely.

Spirits, more than I ever imagined, compressed above and below. One drew me like the red pointer on Dimitri's compass—no matter where I spun, there it was. The Other, who was also me, spoke in music I could not understand, the staccato and baritone vibrating through what used to be us. We could be one, like we had once been. I could feel it, like we were the high and low keys, only becoming a full melody when combined. Diffuse memories of sharing one mind drifted back. Of magic flowing with each heartbeat, the world bending around us.

There were no colors; still, somewhere close to me, a darkness pulled at my Spirit. The other new Spirits gathered around it, swirling until consumed.

Under my focus, it expanded, as if it had been waiting to pounce.

I needed to know it. Had been searching for it.

The Other pulled the other way and I almost knew. Almost—

Anger swirled from me and the others—so many, ancient and new. Death was supposed to be restful.

Then I was squished together, solidifying—

Then separated once more. *Alone*. If I could have screamed, I would have.

Instead, I clung to the Other as she pushed me away.

Death can wait. This isn't your tomorrow, said the voice I'd thought lost forever as my Spirit squeezed into my corpse, my eyes bursting open and chest inflating.

Faces swirled against the light of the setting sun as they bent over me.

"Heal her again," someone demanded, his energy in turmoil.

Instinctively, I reached out to calm it, cooing as you do to a newborn. The exertion left my recovering senses blank.

"Are you using your powers on me?"

His resentment overrode what I had done, and I pulled back into myself, unwilling to touch the burning emotions so like the invisible Spirits around us. Anger filled Tal. Seemed the dead and the living had a lot in common.

Something was tied to me, Spirit to Spirit, and it sought to attack, whispering we had to defend ourselves.

An ally.

A sister.

Another version of myself.

A hand squeezed mine. *Gennady*. His mind held the bitter taste of grief. "I risked the Goddess's ire and done everything I can. She must do the rest herself. Choose to return. She died, after that many might no longer fight for life."

Died.

Was this what the Spirits felt? His gnarled hand moored my thoughts.

This was not death.

Lumi—Lumi was dead, and she was here.

It all came rushing back before I could return to the emptiness.

We just wanted to live, not for the day, not to steal enough to carry us through to the next, but *really live*, and somehow, this world had killed us both, no matter who had dealt the final blow. She did not blame me. I knew because the bond was, impossibly, still there. Maybe I was anchoring her to this life, or the rules were different for death keepers. Maybe she lived as part of me. Or maybe I'd returned mad.

I noticed the familiar black ceiling and imaginary constellations. The world we had dreamt of. A world that kicked us while we were down and continued after our death.

Something always brought me back to Mandible Street. Here, Lumi and I had slept under the sloped roof, where rain fell like spears and the sun cooked the air in summer.

"Princess—Ms. Komarova, talk to me. Do you know who I am?" Gennady asked as his concerned face and giant beard blocked the painted on night sky.

I shuffled up in my old bed until I was sitting against the sloping ceiling. The room was torn apart, possessions strewn across the floor.

"What are you doing here?"

They did not belong here, in my other life. Gennady, Koshka, and Mariska, and two guards I did not recognize.

Koshka stepped forward, hands behind her back as if to appear nonthreatening despite having killed me.

"You were sentenced to hang until dead by the court and no one should be above the law, so you died, and we brought you back. You are officially dead. There is money in a bag. Leave Tal."

"Did Dimi order you to do this?" I asked, my tangled mind jumping from death to all my dreams fulfilled. I could go and live well. No one would come after me. There was no one left who cared.

Lumi had been right. She would never leave. But now I had the means to.

Koshka grunted. "I'm still not sure you didn't set us up in the tunnels—then again on the bridge. But you saved him when we could not. Consider this a life for a life."

She said the last words as if they hurt her.

Mariska gave her a hard look before squeezing my hand, her magic swirling through my body.

"You deserve much more than this—I didn't know." She choked down an angry sob. "You could have told me—you all could have told me."

"I couldn't." Despite the healing magic, my throat was sore. "I killed for him. She's dead."

The words were for me.

Immeasurable time passed. There were no more tears or things to say. Mariska had questioned me until the others pulled her away, saying she had to return to the palace. She promised to be back to check in. I think I nodded.

I was left with no Lumi, prince, or guards. No duties, threats, or promises to keep.

Freedom.

Something was waking in me—a raging grief, a dark void, guilt enough to drown me. Feelings I had not been forced to face because my future held only death.

Tired, but otherwise miraculously healthy, I got to my feet, found a bottle of Rivertown moonshine we had hidden behind the dresses, and climbed through the window to the roof.

The torches and Spirits below hid all but the brightest stars. Leaning against the chimney, I took a deep swallow from the bottle, then dropped all my walls.

Thousands moved below me—joy, anger, exhaustion, grief, love—they all sang, like the dead had.

I thought a lot of Spirits were out tonight, before feeling how many there truly were. It should not have been a surprise. Everyone who lived must die, and all dead came to Tal. Morovara had told me. I had seen the death figures of Tal in the Archive. Every city in the world had the same. Every village. Every farm.

There must be scholars in the palace who calculated the true numbers. They might have laughed at the surprise of someone who had lived in Tal their whole life not realizing how outnumbered the living were.

When you only saw the Spirits swirling on the streets or lighting up the Bone Grove, it was easy to ignore how the old people complained there were more now than in their youth.

I could no longer ignore it. If the dead were rising, the living were doomed.

The magic flared with my feelings and somewhere out there another answered.

My sister was gone, but I *felt* her.

The Spirits carried more of their living self than anyone knew.

I emptied the bottle, wishing the memories and longing away. No matter what remained in her Spirit, I had killed her.

A sea of despair waited for me when I let the events of the last three-day sink in, so instead, I drank until the world spun.

For bells, I just watched. Slowly, the buzz from the alcohol disappeared and the magic that had condemned and saved me sang someone else was moving below.

Carefully, I made my way down the ladder to the second floor, where Kirill, Lana, and guests had their rooms, finding it empty. I did not need to open any doors to know it. The headache and nausea I knew was coming made me hesitate. I could crawl back into bed. Turn away as I had in the cell.

Perhaps the need for normalcy drove me. Or just the need for a distraction.

I headed down the spiral stairs, across the hall, and into Kirill's office. For years, Lumi and I offered our paltry takes to be counted against our debts. While we had cleaned and maintained the rest of the house, we had otherwise never been allowed inside the study. The ledgers and business too secretive, Kirill too suspicious.

A woman in red embroidered coat and wide skirt sat behind the giant desk. A beaked mask made of mirrors and onyx turned

her face into that of a sparkling predator. It showcased her blue eyes, red-painted lips, and perfect blond curls while making anyone hesitate to challenge her. The only grief-signs for her father's death were the black bands encircling her wrists.

Bereavement and curses became my stepsister.

Lana made a note in the too-familiar ledger, then lowered the pen and considered me.

"They swore me to secrecy, trooped upstairs with your wrapped body—cursing the perfectly fine ladder—then left bells ago. I'll keep my mouth shut, but don't expect more. When the dust settles and fall comes, I'll be among the living."

"You're not planning your own revenge?"

"For killing my father? I might have known how to pretend affection better than you, but don't mistake it for love. Who do you think he beat before you came along?"

Exhausted, I sank into the opposite chair.

"Soot-stained as usual, cinder-girl." She narrowed her kohl-lined eyes. "If my fabric is permanently stained, I expect you to pay."

"You care about the fabric but not family?" Her insults did not sting as usual. They were familiar, something to cling to as everything changed.

"Lecture someone else, kin killer. This is all mine now, and I'm not letting it go to waste."

Kin killer. Double if Kirill counted. That one did sting. "You're not afraid I'll come for you next? A dangerous witch like me?"

She scoffed. "If you wanted to kill me you would have. I have hardly seen a trial with more lies and trumped-up charges. You, Vanya, my kindest stepsister, are the least of Tal's worries."

Somehow, my abrasive stepsister—who I had despised almost as much as Kirill—mocking the Council as much as she had me, solidified something inside.

"It was a closed court."

Lana's eyes glittered like her mask. "You and all others always underestimated me. Even von Lemerch and her priestesses who preach that the common people will rise when the royals fall, took one look at me, and sent me off to be your maid because I enjoy fine dresses. I've been doing my father's books and diverging funds for years. The nobles who owed him now owe me, and I called in a few debts. Information is often more valuable than money when you plan to rise above Lowtown's dirt."

I blinked at her. She spoke with a competency I had not previously heard, except when it came to dresses and lace. Lana was vain, superior, and petty—but maybe that was not all she was.

"You don't support von Lemerch?"

"My father lent her a very large sum of money. For financial reasons, I need her to come out on top. That's it. I don't like false promises."

"It's about money?"

Somehow, she managed to convey her derision at my ignorance with only her eyes. "It always comes down to money, and even ancient monsters need a lender. The Crown buys up half of the food that enters Tal and tax the rest. They resell it to the noble households and the rest of us bid on what's left. Do you think people slaughtered their cattle early, giving up that sure paycheck, and came to fight for her on faith alone?"

Yes. That was what I had thought. Even Dimitri had not questioned it, perhaps believing people would continue to jump at his commands even if he did not pay. Some would, like the bone soldiers, but I should have questioned all those people leaving their farms without fighting.

"You know where the food is?"

"No." She swept her hand over the open book. "But almost all my father's funds are tied up in her scheme. Stupid, if you ask me. Not that anyone did. When she comes again, I suggest you make yourself scarce."

"You're letting me stay?" I had enough money to go anywhere, had longed to leave this house for years, but faced with the decision to leave the only home I had, the dread inside grew.

I was dead—how could I make a life? I felt the noose around my neck, Lumi's hand in mine, the pressure of the Spirits.

"No matter what I think of you, you're the closest thing I have to family," Lana said. "And the house is big enough for two. But don't bring trouble to my door."

"And the curse?"

I had expected her to bring it up, to rant about what I had done in a fit of anger. Talking like this did not erase years of abuse. But it did make me question if I had ever really known her.

"Your problem, Vanya, is that you carry your heart on your sleeve and ignore the tools you have. Beauty, femininity and youth were useful when I needed my father to underestimate me. Beating you on Flora von Heskin's behalf, even taking the princess's bed, convinced them when they suspected me of going soft for not reporting your every step. After a silly tantrum, no one accuses you of conspiring against them.

"This"—she swept her hand over her covered face—"might well serve better when demanding respect. You've given me a

weapon and reputation. Every curse can be a blessing. Every act has two sides. You think yourself kind, but have that need to help and appease, not hurt?"

Her words hit home. I had tried so hard to make my mother proud, to obey Ealhswip, then help Dimitri. It had ended with both Lumi and me dead. Ealhswip happy enough. The king dead. Me a murderer. The food still missing. The Day of the Dead still coming. And, unknown to the living, the Spirits of Tal rallying.

But you saved Dimitri, a small voice inside whispered. Would that last past the wedding though? My headache was building, thoughts sluggish.

Lana picked the pen up again. The scratch of it against the parchment reminded me of how I had struggled to put my thoughts into words. But Lana—

"Von Lemerch didn't swear you to secrecy? You could tell Dimitri about her plans."

"Did you not hear how all my funds are tied up with her. Beyond that, I would not betray a client. Nothing in me for that." The pen did not stop moving as she spoke.

"Even if the city hangs in the balance?"

"There will always be someone with a grand plan. I've very few principles. This is one."

My body sagged, and I no longer regretted cursing her. She could have spoken up from the start. The cold of death and recriminations pulled at me.

A bell rang. Lana put down the pen and reached for an impeccable coat. In the doorway, she paused.

"Are you coming?"

"Where?" I could go back to the roof, or bed. Hide. Everything would have been better if I had not opened my eyes again.

"The coronation. Your prince is about to greet Tal as king."

Dimitri. I could not see him. He killed and saved me. Blamed me.

"I don't—"

Lana narrowed her eyes. "This isn't personal. It's history. This might be the last king of Tal. The final royal before the people. It's not about you or me or him. The world is changing, and I plan to witness it."

When she left, I trailed behind, unable to shake her words. *The last king of Tal.*

An open coach waited by the front door.

The streets were packed, red dresses, paint, and drink everywhere. Bloody stick figures and complaints were everywhere. Progress was slow as the whole city congregated as high on Palace Road as possible.

When there was no way forward no matter how much the coach driver cursed, we stopped. I could have climbed a building for a better view, but Lana was right. This was not about me being close to him. It was about being part of something larger than us.

The King was a symbol separate from the person.

As the first rays of the sun rose behind the palace, they outlined a man on the closest rampart. On his head a star shone. I knew it must be the crown, that this was someone whose touch and lips and laugh I loved, a man with ink-splotched fingers who preferred the sky to finery, but at that moment, as part of the surging crowd, I saw a god.

Above him, griffons flew in awe-inspiring displays. Trumpets sounded and around us, all of Tal's bells rang. The crowd erupted in ear-shattering cheers—some for the king, others for the Goddess to rise. All for Tal.

Any dream I once held that I could stand next to him—that we could have a future together—shattered. It had started as two unwilling people meeting in the night, both wishing to escape. Now, the sun rose on one dead and one alive, one rising and one falling.

His path was set. *Where would mine lead?*

Vanya

I only left the attic to sneak into the kitchen when hunger gnawed at my insides. Tal came alive at night, but I kept to the daylight rhythm of the palace and griffons. I did not want to see the Spirits, hear the street musicians or the preparations for the Day of the Dead celebrations.

On the second day, I ran out of moonshine, but the cold deadness inside did not dissipate. I dreamt of the sun hitting Dimitri and the crown while I remained in shadow. I dreamt of him on his knees surrounded by Spirits. Then I opened my eyes and saw Lumi's dead eyes. Under the numbness, anger churned.

How could he not believe me after I saved him? Having his healers resurrect me was not enough. It had cost him nothing while I had given everything. His notebook remained tucked into my pocket, unable to throw it away, unable to open it again.

I blocked magic and all thoughts of the future. Still, in the twilight between sleep and wakefulness, something tugged on the bond between me and Lumi, and I remembered the millions of restless Spirits around us.

The voices of Lana's guests often echoed through the otherwise too-silent house. Some, like Kirill's enforcer, Grigori, I recognized, others were new. If I had thought about it, I would have expected to find her floundering, not taking over from her father without missing a step.

On the fifth day, Lana pounded on the trap door.

"Von Lemerch is to arrive in two bells. Make yourself scarce. And visit the bath house while you're at it. At least you only used to smell of soot, not drunken sweat."

Fear quickly blossomed into something else.

Ealhswip had benefited from each of my choices, even when I thought myself clever. Except one. The crown—she would already have searched the Taliell's shore.

Could that and Dimitri saving me be the one thing she had not predicted?

I was finally outside her game, perhaps able to get answers instead of more questions.

"I'm staying," I called down. *If I could spy on them, perhaps—*

"Do you want to die again?"

"I'm the only one who never wanted anyone to die."

Lana scoffed. "But you always tried to throw away your life."

"Can't throw away something that's already gone."

"Well, you're not throwing away mine or what I'm building. Leave or I'll hand you over myself. And if you still want nothing more when you return, you can go back to emptying my chamber pot and cleaning the hearths. At least then you'll be useful."

No matter her reasoning, she had seemed to enjoy beating me at Flora's command. Had humiliated me and Lumi for years while insisting we should be sold to the brothels. Lana would not hesitate to give me to Ealhswip. I was only surprised she had stayed her hand this long.

I no longer fear death, part of me wanted nothing more than for it all to be over—Lumi should have lived, I should have died—but Ealhswip's threat of keeping my Spirit as a pet did terrify me.

I dragged myself to my feet.

"I'll go. Will you at least tell me what she wants?"

"Why would I?" There was a suspicious note in Svetlana's voice, as if she thought I was trying to trick her.

"Maybe if I knew more… if we told someone… they would be able to do something to stop her."

"Like the king? Have you not had enough of playing someone's side thing?"

I swallowed. Dimitri would never trust another word I said. After arresting and killing and resurrecting me, he ordered me to leave Tal. As he sat on that throne of skulls and roses, watching me when they ordered my death, there had been only anger

in his eyes.

"You tell me what she wants, and I'll find *someone*."

Lana shrugged. "Just don't lead any mess back to my door."

Her heels clicked down the stairs as I shredded the last of the flying clothes, I had fought in. Hung in. Lumi's blood stained the leather and while part of me wanted nothing more than to destroy them, another part clung to the time *before*—flying with Dimitri's arms around me, when the world stood still and simultaneously rushed by.

But I could not walk the streets of Tal half dressed and bloody. So, trying to not think of the last time I was there, I quickly washed in the courtyard rainwater barrel. I should have shorn my hair in grief like Dimi had, but it was too similar to the courtesans preparing Lumi before we went to the palace. I might not know who I was anymore, but I could not be her.

Shrugging into comfortable gray pants—which had once been black— shirt, and fraying coat, I could pass for a messenger boy if I stayed to the shadows. Dressing was mechanical until I faced the one pair of leather boots. Mine.

Lumi had given me hers when we arrived at the engagement ball, insisting I needed to be able to run. Still, the string had broken during my mad dash through the royal woods. One shoe remained with my few possessions in the Royal Theater's attic, the other one probably ruined by the weather.

They were well made. If we had the coin, a cobbler could have given them new soles and polish. They, like us, had just needed a bit of care to not break.

Tears stung my eyes and the cold inside cracked, like ice in spring.

It should not matter. My sister was dead. She did not need shoes.

A tear fell as I laced my boots tight, then, refusing to think of why, I tucked Dimitri's notebook into the coat pocket.

I climbed from the roof down to the alley, each step familiar enough that I could do it in my sleep, my determination patching the cracks, the ice transforming into something harder.

Lumi had been willing to give everything to change Tal. She had thought killing Dimitri was the key to stopping Ealhswip and the royals both. Coins clinked in my pockets. I had been given life and means—how I used both was up to me. I no longer fantasized of the impossible, happy future for myself I had thought I would find if we got away from Mandible Street and Tal.

It had not existed on the steppe nor in the scheming palace. I had been a dreamer.

Maybe if I gave it everything, like Lumi, a better tomorrow could exist for someone else though.

I passed burned-out husks with tents stretched across the remaining beams. People could live like this in summer, but the Day of the Dead and fall were only fourteen days away and the cold mountain winds would come.

Among the destruction, plain wooden houses were being raised with black sigils painted above their entrances—*had Popova found a way to keep out the undead?*

At one half-standing wreck on the end of Platine Street, no different from any other, my feet stopped. The hard-packed mud street bore no traces of Alexei's and Kirill's blood. People passed, children kicked a ball, but I still saw their bodies. Saw how Kirill's knife struck before I could react.

Alexei had not condemned me. How much would have been different if he had lived? Could he have bridged the distance between the prince and me, avoiding the deadly conclusion?

Further up the street, something crashed to the ground. Men swore. Snapping out of my reverie, I sank into the shadows, ready to run. Lowtown was never safe.

The sun had fully set and swinging lanterns and the first Spirits illuminated the night. As I looked toward Temple District, a Spirit solidified.

People stared at it as it took on human features. The magic inside played, my determination faltered. I already knew what would come.

For one brilliant moment, the bond blazed and my sister's eyes met mine, then her Spirit vanished. If not for the reverent whispers around me, I would have thought it a vision driven by grief and guilt.

I repeated familiar words, as if it would make them true. *Spirits hold nothing of their living memories. They are interchangeable and equal. They have no will.*

All Talians knew this. We had all been wrong.

I ran.

Each corner I passed was decorated with a bloody stick figure, raising my terror. Ealhswip and her supporters were everywhere, a secret cult living in the shadows.

The magic slipped from my grip. Anger, anxiety, and most of all, anticipation filled the crowd. Something was coming.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a Spirit shaped like a girl with chopped-off hair. People fell to their knees whispering the Goddess walked the streets and of blood to come.

Sprinting away from guilt and anger and the past, I entered Temple District.

Morovara had said I was always welcome, and I was sure she knew more than she had said. The high priestess held secrets for the Temple and the dead—well, I was dead and needed to know.

The chants of the dead rose around and inside me.

I no longer felt the Spirits dotting the twilight—I was no death keeper—but as I rushed past, I remembered the pressure and ancient anger. What would happen to Tal if the priestesses quieted?

Again, one white shape solidified. I turned and pounded my feet harder into the cobbled path. There are things you can live with and those you cannot, and I could not face my sister.

Morovara's great ziggurat of black stone steps rose before me, the squealing bats rising like a cloud from the top where my great-grandmother lived. I had thought I could be the final shove that brought Ealhswip down—the connecting tissue between the rebels and royals. I had been a foolish girl, unable to see how they sidelined me.

Last time, I entered like a princess. This time, I was a wraith, fleeing truths and life.

I arrived at Morovara's floor, praying for someone to take all my lies and make something out of them. Instead, I found a lone tabby rolled up on the floor-bed in the corner. Would the high priestess still be at the palace following the coronation? I had been foolish again, expecting her to be waiting for me.

With nowhere else to go, I settled on the bed, petting the cat. The oil lamps remained lit by the entrance, but here in the far corner, I sat wrapped in shadows. Stone arches opened to the sky outside, allowing bands of stars I had never seen to shine. So far away. So great. Each a god or goddess who might have been or once was.

I raised my hand, holding it so that it looked like if I only reached a bit further, I could catch them. Sacrilege, here in the holiest place in Tal.

"Sometimes I wonder if they are leaving or arriving," Morovara said behind me, making me jump.

Before I could excuse my presence in her private space and bed, she wrapped her bird-thin arms around me.

"I thought you dead, girl. Both of you at once and there was nothing I could do."

I hugged her back, inhaling the scents of incense and dried roses.

"I *am* dead."

"Then you're in the right place."

Morovara called for food and for the first time since Dimitri left on Cherny, I felt my hunger. She spoke of her day, little things, while the tea's minty steam filled my lungs and spicy meat pastry in butter dough warmed me from the inside.

"I don't know what to do," I finally said, interrupting the high priestess's tale of how she found the kitten.

She patted my hand. "You don't have to do anything. You're young, rushing about is natural, but sometimes slowing down helps. I've already told them you'll be staying with the initiates. You're unbound, Great-granddaughter, for death severs all ties. There's power in that. Power in you. Don't wait for someone to choose you, choose yourself, and, when you're ready, your future."

"Thank you," I said and meant it. When was the last time anyone offered me something without wanting equal in return?

"We're family, girl. When you're ready to talk, I'll be here. Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Don't leave without telling me."

I nodded, sleep pulling at my eyelids.

A young priestess led me to a room barely larger than the cell I just escaped. That's where the similarities ended. The black-stone room held four oil lamps and red pillows, hooks lined the wall and a small bookshelf fit under the window. A wash basin and cloth sat together with a full water pitcher on top. Two folded white robes lay on the otherwise-empty shelf.

The initiate showed me how to hook the pillows together and cover them with a blanket, making a bed. In the pressing summer heat, I needed nothing more for the night.

With a final smile and slight bow, she left me, closing the heavy curtain that served as a door.

Despite having nothing left inside me, I dressed in the soft robe, shedding the last part of my old life.

I fell asleep watching the stars stare down at me.

In the morning, a package with five books had been slid under my curtain. A note from Morovara said when I was ready to learn of our history, it was there for me. Perhaps the choices of Eydis—daughter of Ealhswip and my ancestor—would help me make my own.

Reverently, I opened the first journal and started reading.

Dimitri

Tal was in worse shape than I had ever imagined. There were barely any mages left. Healers, once considered rare, were the most numerous at one hundred and twenty-seven, perhaps because they lived separately inside the hospital.

Despite my suspicions, the discovery that more than half of the bloodlines had been ended in the last fifty years by the so-called plague confirmed Lord Bersig's assessment that it was man-made. I'd ordered Kazimir Bersigov be given everything he asked for as he reconstructed Bersig's laboratory in the hospital.

As if blessed by the Death Goddess and Wishmaker both, Koshka had made it out of the tunnels through the door we entered through. With only her boots remaining out of her precious bone armor and one perfectly preserved flower, she'd ran straight into the Roja watching the entrance. When I visited her at the hospital, she'd sworn to get away from Tal and death in the same breath as promising vengeance on the priestesses who had killed Yahontov before her eyes. She'd volunteered to take his place as my bodyguard. How could I deny her, even though her presence reminded me how the Death Goddess stalked my steps?

At least with the poisonous flower she brought, Kazimir thought he might be able to develop a cure.

Following Koshka's instructions, I'd sent bone soldiers to the tunnels for more flowers, but they found stockpiled food instead, as if they had wanted us to find it. I had ordered it left untouched for now. My forefathers' expectations pressed me ever down and the city would soon be starving. A decision needed to be made.

Everyone clambered for my time. I wished to hide away, maybe even disappear to the mountains I had so despised. When I ran into Helia, the nobles expected me to treat her like my bride. Instead, I turned the other way, unable to see her face without thinking about another woman—wondering what she was doing, how far she could have traveled by now. If she had cursed me. Did it matter if she was finally free?

The days after the coronation were a rush of meetings with the Council and bells locked away with von Uster, my restraint crumbling more each time. The Goddess had already stolen my chance to break my father as he broke me. Finally, I had convinced the spymaster we could afford to move against the Council. My revenge might not be as sweet as I'd anticipated, but its time had come, for the last pieces of my past needed to be settled before I could focus on the future.

As the sun set, I entered the Goddess's Garden at the Tower through a side entrance. A lot of things had changed but Eki could still be found caring for the Goddess's greenhouse during twilight.

I had ignored her first two messages reminding me of my promise to talk to her after the coronation. I could not handle another fight, another woman who might have only pursued me due to my crown. But her last message hinted at secrets I needed to know, and she threatened to leave Tal. Mariska insisted I go to hear Eki out.

In another life, Ekatarina would have joined the Temple. She had followed the old caretaker around since she was seven, amazed that something so small and beautiful like nightshade could kill. There had always been a darker side to her. Once, I found it tantalizing.

As predicted, candles shone inside the hexagonal greenhouse at the edge of the garden. With a bit of care, I slipped inside without being spotted. As king, I had the right to enter the Women's Tower, but I had no energy to put on the hard, inaccessible facade that would let me pass without fuss. Only a few days in, I understood why my father had so often stayed in his chambers.

The darkness hid me as I paused. Eki moved purposefully inside, weeding and dirtying the apron, then replanting wiry purple plants from a nursery pot. I had loved her, hurt her, blamed and spurned her—what would her words do this time?

I knocked with my knuckle against a glass pane. It was a bad idea to startle someone surrounded by poisons.

She spun, eyes wide and lips parted as if I had scared her anyway. The past years had stolen her nerves of stone. No matter what had happened I never wanted that.

"You asked me to come," I reminded her and closed the door behind me.

"I—" She swallowed her next words as a little girl with the same black hair and dirt-covered hands stepped around her

skirts, eyes equally wide in fright.

From the outside, I had assumed Eki alone, but the Tower was a place for children. I should have remembered how they snuck in everywhere.

I bent my knee to bring myself to the little girl's height. I had no desire in scaring children either. If only the Council feared me like this.

"Hi there, aren't you a bit young to learn the Goddess's plants?"

"I'm three." She scrunched up her nose. "I only touch what Mommy says I can."

Eki pressed a hand over the little girl's mouth, only muffling the last word, while my brain shut down.

I stood there, blinking and staring, waiting for Eki to deny the girl's words and tell her to run to her real mother.

The girl's eyes told the truth—the irises holding Eki's dark brown at the center and my icy blue around the edge. Not as mismatched as mine but enough.

"He died," I finally said, not sure if it was a question or just the statement I had repeated so many times the words could not be denied. "They burned his body."

"This is Dasha." Eki nodded to me, her eyes begging me to understand the incomprehensible. "She was born premature, but the healers saved her."

My other knee hit the checkered stone floor. I had wondered what her words would do, avoided this, but could not have anticipated the rage and sorrow and joy swirling through me. Like the night I had shown my grief on the edge of the Temple District, tears gathered in my eyes.

I was not sure what this little girl—*my little girl*—saw in my face that made her shrink back into her mother. With a breath, I forced a smile onto my lips.

"Hi, Dasha. That's a pretty name for a pretty girl, just like her mother."

"Who're you?" she asked, demanding despite her age.

I looked helplessly at Eki, unsure what she wanted me to do. She met my eyes unflinchingly, her old nerves showing as if she had only been hiding those as well. Like this changed everything. She was right.

"It's up to you," she said, and I knew what she meant.

Dasha could grow up a hidden bastard, never knowing the truth. She could be known but not claimed, and thus given a limited respect. Or she could be who she was, for the lack of marriage between me and her mother was irrelevant. And it was not like we had not tried.

The candles flickered as if the world moved inside the dark greenhouse, a sliver of my magic escaping. I should have guessed when my curse did nothing; instead, I had believed in the powerlessness my father complained of my entire life.

I focused on the serious little girl. Despite the chubby cheeks and two-colored eyes, she was all Eki, but maybe if I got to know her, I would find parts of myself as well.

Already on my knees, I bowed my head and offered her my hand. When she dared to take it, I spoke the words that would reshape my life and Tal.

"I'm Dimitri Alexandre Ivanov, King of Tal, and your father." The wind swirled around our interlaced hands. She stared at me unflinching, seeming to understand this was a solemn moment. "You're Dasha Ekatarina Dimiova, and one day you'll become the first queen of Tal."

The candles flared. The world stilled. Surrounded by deadly plants, with the woman I once thought to marry, it was done. Though only the three of us heard the words, the decision was made. The fake marriage to Helia, my motivation for improving Tal, and being a better king than my father, was reformed around this little girl I did not know. All the feelings I had carried, the revenge I had dreamt of for the son that never existed, solidified into determination to make the world safe for her.

My second chance.

I could no longer step down as soon as Tal calmed. I could never be free. And I'd never been happier.

Eki broke the silence, tears running freely down her cheeks. She gave our girl a little push toward the glass door.

"Go to bed. I need to talk to your father."

While Dasha did not understand the full importance of the words and how her life was about to change, she gave me a final long stare before escaping the greenhouse.

When only Eki and I remained, I staggered to my feet.

There were so many questions locked in my throat, but she did not force me to ask; instead, her words rushed out as if she had spent years holding them back.

"When they chased your father's men from the birthing suite, Mariska pleaded for me and the child. Maybe it was not even necessary. The healers swear to preserve life—few would hand over a babe to be killed no matter royal orders. Another woman bore a stillborn boy that morning, and the body had yet to be given over to the Temple. That's who they brought you while hiding Dasha in the nursery.

"Your father never questioned it, neither did you, and we could not say anything that could give it away… He would have killed her, Dimi. The threat never went away. Instead, you did, and I was alone. I thought she would be safe if we married

when you returned."

"I've been back two months."

She nodded, passion I had mistaken for insanity glowing in her eyes.

"But the Roja was always watching, and you were still powerless. I couldn't risk anyone finding out. The first year, I did nothing but hide with Dasha in my rooms. Each day, I prayed for the Goddess to stay away and your return. Then she got a cough that would not ease. Mariska healed her, but she could only come in secret, and it was almost too late. Holding her as she gasped for breath, I decided I needed to do something."

"That's why you still insisted to marry me when we saw each other in the garden?"

"Unless we married, do you think your father would have ordered any different just because she was older? If anything, my daughter had become more of a liability. A way to circumvent the line to the throne. A tool for usurpers—that's what he called her before she was even out of my belly."

"I would have stopped him—done anything." I ground my teeth. She had no idea how I'd grieved. The pain that never went away after losing a child. *She* had never felt it.

Eki scoffed. "You only had eyes for the fake princess. Your father could have lived another twenty years. Perhaps without the fake princess we—you—could have had a chance."

Perhaps there was an apology in there for what she had done to Vanya. Once, I admired how fiercely Eki fought for her own.

"What else have you hidden?"

"I continued taking care of the plants." She swept her hands around her. "One night, I stayed almost until dawn. I guess I was very still because the priestess didn't notice me until she was inside."

"After how we were betrayed, you asked for their help?"

"Living is more important than revenge. In exchange for the Goddess's own seedlings, she swore to give us a place to hide would we ever need it. And she offered revenge on the king."

Eki pointed toward the end of the greenhouse, where moss covered the ground and delicate white flowers burst up like stars.

I had seen them before—in Bersig's drawing, in Koshka's hand, under the city surrounded by undead.

The poison that killed mages, that created the plague, spreading fear and death through the whole of Tal, came from the royal gardens.

"How many of the cuttings have you given them?"

"Over two years? Hundreds."

For the first time, Eki lost some of her self-righteousness. "Twice, they also demanded I cover the Tower sigils from the inside. They want to remove the monarchy, I'm not blind, but that seemed the only way. They promised me and Dasha safety when the Goddess rises."

I remembered the night Vanya found me in the courtyard, how something spooked the griffons, and I thought I saw Spirits inside the palace walls. I had been right. The stable lay not far from here.

"Who is behind the conspiracy and poison?"

Eki shook her head mutely and for a moment I saw a woman in a cell equally unable to answer. Whoever they were, they knew about my daughter.

I did not push. Instead, I focused on the flowers that killed my father and grandfather.

"Destroy them, every last one, then pack your and Dasha's things."

"Where are we going?"

"To safety—until this is over, we tell no one else."

Eki stood close but for once, there was nothing romantic or contrived affection between us. "And you?"

"I'll ensure Dasha has a crown when she reaches adulthood. I'll do whatever is needed."

"Leave with us," Eki said, already removing her apron and gloves. "Let us gather what gold we can carry and fly far from here. No one could command you back anymore."

For three years, I'd wanted nothing more. Now, I marched outside, ignoring her words—Tal and Dasha deserved better than me running, and if Solovyova was correct, marrying was the only way to protect both. I was never leaving Tal. Already, the crown bound me. When Dasha came of age, I would tell her all I knew.

Where my father and I had been given no real choice, I would give her all. Then if she did not want the city and crown, we could go with Helia's plan and find someone willing to rule.

Being king came with privileges. It was time to make use of them, for there was more on the line than I ever expected. I had just named that little girl my heir, throwing her into a life of privilege and danger.

I revised my plans for the Council members as I sent the first servants I saw to summon them to the king's chambers. I needed this behind me—behind Dasha—and they needed to know who was in charge.

It was time to listen to myself instead of letting others pull my strings. I had already kept up the facade too long. If Alexei had been here, I would have told him I might never be ready for another fight, but I had gotten up anyway.

It was time to show my hand.

Back in my royal chambers, I cleaned away my usual mess of books and maps, then ordered drinks brought.

The spymaster was the first to arrive, bringing the selected servers and the documents he had gathered over the previous three-day.

I gave him a nod, hoping he would see my acquiescence to his less violent approach even if he could not guess the reason for it. Von Uster considered me, as if he saw something had changed. I found myself wanting to confide in him—would he who swore loyalty to the Crown and stability of Tal greet the news of an illegitimate heir with approval or the fury my father had?

There was no time to find out.

Osipova, a tall and broad, dark-skinned man with short curly hair, strode in with the bearing that came from being the scion of a great Talian house and the Sorachian ruling family. He gave a perfunctory bow before accepting the tea he was offered.

As I had no issue with him, I could only hope he would not object to what was about to happen. I needed at least a fraction of the Council to remain if I wanted to pretend the outcome of this meeting had been amicable.

Mar Heridan entered with Sophina Dorova. Despite my personal issues with her, I could not help feeling disgust at how the man almost thrice her age stared down her dress while walking closer than necessary. It also brought back memories of a barge, the councilman opposite with a consort, and Tempest in my lap—hiding and helping me without question.

I could not pretend the heat in the memory came from magic. I had broken the distance between us. In the end, I had broken us as well. At least what we had learned was only moments away from being put to good use.

Savva Novikov sought von Uster before dismissively nodding in my direction.

"The Council only meets in the courthouse. What's the meaning of this? Keeping time like a commoner, is this what we have come to?" he said to the room, waving his flamboyant coat and looking ready for anything but bed.

Well, maybe not ready for the turn his night was about to take.

"Sit," I said, finding the smile on my lips easy to summon. Dasha was alive. Vanya was alive. And if both were unreachable, that did not matter. The world held hope, and instead of ice, flames flickered inside me.

Heridan demanded a stronger drink as he sat.

I nodded to the woman serving him. Koshka fit perfectly into the palace uniform, her hair neater than I had ever seen it. I had longed to plunge my own blade into these murderers—for signing your name to the order was no different than delivering the blow—but kings did not dirty their hands. And after Zakhar, I had enough blood on mine anyway. If I was going to hold on to the throne and be the king Alexei had seen, I would need to use all my tools, even if that meant trusting again.

The clock's pendulum swung. Minutes ticked.

As I was about to order the door locked, Kazimir Bersigov rushed in.

A few years my senior, disheveled in a way that made him look ready for anything, and clothes that would allow him to fit into most places, the younger Bersigov bore little resemblance to the rotund grandfather I remembered.

"I was at the hospital and didn't receive the summons. We're almost th—"

"Not now," I said and waved for him to sit.

Of the eight councilmen and women, seven—or a representative in Bersig's case—sat at the king's table. I stole a glance at the clock. Half a bell after the time I had ordered them here.

"It seems von Lemerch is not able to attend. As the matter is urgent, I'll not delay any longer, but take the matter up with her personally later."

Von Uster nodded in understanding. She had not voted for Dasha's death—for I could already not think of my child as the faceless boy I mourned for three years—but that did not make her innocent.

Koshka and the equally disguised handpicked Roja unobtrusively moved to stand behind two of the guilty Council members each.

Ignoring them, Heridan waved his hand dismissively. "What couldn't wait until morning, son? Your father—"

"Is dead. And even he did not call me 'son.' I am your king, and you are here to listen. Be glad if that is all you have to do."

I stared them down, one after the other, allowing the howling wind inside me to be seen. Even Sophina did not meet my eyes with a fluttering of lashes like usual.

Novikov turned to von Uster again. "Is there war? Or are the peasants attacking?"

Ignoring his disrespect, I continued. Revenge was supposed to be sweet, but I found no reason to drag this out. I wanted it to end, so I could start on something new.

"Three years ago, four of you voted to murder my child. As it was tied, my father cast the final one. You gave legitimacy to his actions. Had you not, Ekatarina Kuznetsova's family would have spoken out. Had you not, someone might have stepped up to help." *Thank the Goddess and Wishmaker both, the healers had anyway. After this, I would find a way to reward them.*

Even Novikov had the decency to look uncomfortable. Tal was a city of death, but we did not kill children, especially not for their parents' crimes.

"The king asked us to enforce the law," Heridan said, face reddening. "It threatened to disrupt the succession and our relations with Oberwalden."

"At least you don't deny it. And do you always follow the law, Mar Heridan? How about wedding contacts? They are holy."

The pulse on the side of his neck sped. “My private business—”

I slammed my hand onto the table, letting the anger out. “What could have been more private than my child and marriage?”

Finally, Heridan remained silent.

“Who else wishes to confess your vote?”

Uncomfortable glances were exchanged. Only Kazimir smiled. It seemed he enjoyed seeing the most powerful men and women in Tal squirm.

Sophina rose as if to approach me.

Before she was fully out of the chair, Koshka’s iron grip pressed her back down. Sophina tried to twist around before stiffening, presumably feeling the tip of a hidden blade. Sophina might pretend at powerless innocence, but she was a stronger wind whisperer than I. I had considered ordering Koshka to scar her face, knowing her beauty was what she treasured most, but the inevitable curse would not be worth the satisfaction. What von Uster had found would have to do.

“You murdered your husband,” I said as the spymaster placed five papers before her. “Those are the witness statements—all have volunteered to be verified by a water seer.”

“Seers are often wrong, finding unrelated issues,” she said, finally dropping the facade. “These are servants and relatives who hate me.”

Von Uster grinned, bushy eyebrows twitching, as if revealing the knowledge he kept for the Crown was the finest entertainment. “It’s not an absolute test of veracity, but with five supporting stories our past king had all he needed to persecute you. He only chose to keep it until needed. Our current king, decided that is now.”

He placed two more pages before her. Reading the top, she crumbled.

“Path will testify against me?”

Von Uster nodded. “Seems your current lover doesn’t trust he will not end the same way as the last one.”

“You’ll hang me?” Her voice held a pleading Vanya’s and Eki’s never had despite what had been done to them.

“You’ll put your affairs in order,” I said, bringing her attention back to me. “Before the Day of the Dead, name the heir we select and leave Tal forever. You’ll make up some excuse—you wish to travel, the death of your husband is too hard to bear, I don’t care what as long as it is unconnected to my rule.”

Tired of the theatrics, I turned back to Heridan. “I have the courtesan Esfir. After purchasing her freedom, she was more than happy to name others you have frequented. Name your nephew Head of House and retire to the country or your wife will receive a visit.”

Meekly—a description I had never expected to associate with the councilman—he nodded. If anything, Heridan seemed more afraid than Sophina when faced with execution.

Savva Novikov’s turn. “You have embezzled from the Merchant’s Guild for years.” Von Uster, grin growing, placed more documents on the table. “They’ll do more than hang you, they’ll ruin your whole House.”

The tea and spirits vibrated in their cups with Novikov’s anger as he pushed himself to his feet despite the disguised Roja’s hand on his shoulder. The flippant attitude and dandy clothes hid an exceptional water seer who once served with the griffon riders, for his strength lay in battle instead of foretelling.

A sneer twisted his face. “You think you have power because someone placed a crown on your head. That head can be removed.”

Von Uster and I had agreed Novikov would not fold, but my previous solution—ordering the Roja to sink the knife all the way in—had been cleaner than what came next.

“My spymaster has assured me you’ll not be an issue. It seems I’m not the only one that had a bastard.”

The beverages splashed over me, soaking through my coat and plastering my hair to my forehead. I made no move to defend myself. As an attack, it lacked effect. There were tales of water seers able to control the blood inside people’s bodies, but such power belonged in the lorists’ tales and far past. This was the worst Novikov could do.

Castle Osipova watched, face unreadable, while Kazimir poured himself a new cup of tea.

“If you hurt Mira, I’ll curse your line. You’ll—”

“She’s fine and will remain fine as long as you do as you’re told,” I said, wiping the liquids from my face. “*I* am not a child killer.”

The eight-year-old would be raised in the Tower for now and the spymaster would find a job for her later. We could not waste a water seer, no matter their parentage.

“And I?” Florentiy Makarov said, spreading his long fingers on the table as Novikov sank into his chair. “What unseemly business of mine have you found, my king?”

Von Uster placed a paper before the councilor but did not let this one go. Mjor’s waves were stamped in blue behind the short text, gold sigils on the top and the signature on the bottom marking its validity.

“I bought your extensive debts. You did well in hiding them.”

“Not well enough, it seems.”

I nodded. It had been the easiest and hardest piece to acquire. Again, a knife in the back would have been simpler—and

perhaps preferable from Makarov's slumped posture—than the diplomacy and negotiation it had required to get the Bank of the Waves to sell the debt paper.

Somewhere on Makarov's body, there was a debt sigil which, with the change of ownership to the contract, now responded to me. He would not argue my terms, though he would go into exile penniless. A better man might have pitied him.

Von Uster gathered up the remaining papers, walked around the table and placed them in a neat pile before me before bowing and stepping to my left. No one doubted that I had his support. No one argued.

"Make your preparations. I want travel plans in place by the next three-day. See the former Council members out."

Koskha and the Roja stepped back to allow the four nobles to leave.

Sophina's eyes lingered on me, lashes fluttering and tears staining her cheeks as if she could make me forgive and forget with a look. Vanya had been sent here to pretend to be my bride—had certainly done more than flutter her lashes—but none of it had felt fake.

Did it matter anymore?

My fist clenched. I wanted it to matter. I wanted so many things, but having the Wishmaker grant me the greatest one of all in Dasha, I could not ask for more. Tempest was gone. Storms were not meant to stay. They disrupted the world around them, but that kind of force could not be maintained forever.

The door closed with a clang. Time for the next part.

I relaxed my fingers one by one as I studied the remaining three men.

Von Uster was expectant, exuding an approval I did not want to want. Castle Osipova remained stoic, trained too well to let his thoughts show. Kazimir cracked his fingers, seeming to sense the night was just beginning.

"Now we see to the future. You swore to be loyal. Prove it." I thought of the people chanting in the street, of the bloody skeleton and my grandmother's warnings. There was no more time for doubts. "Osipova, bring the food we found in the tunnels out quietly and store it in Gateways. Have any test you can think of done to know if it's safe. And buy up everything still available for the Day of the Dead festival. If the palace doesn't provide the traditional feast for the city, even those who like us will join the rebels."

Dasha would have a living city instead of one focused on death, even if I needed to strip the gold off the walls.

"Bersigov, are we any closer to a cure?"

Kazimir's carefree expression dropped. "We know it's not infectious and doesn't spread through touch or air." He tapped the table. "A combination of potions and healing shows promise—" His eyes drifted to Koshka. "—but no cure yet."

And somewhere in Tal, a cave full of flowers was being turned into poison. "If you need anything, anything at all, let me know and you'll have it."

I ended the meeting without announcing my daughter. Anonymity gave her protection. After the wedding and after I convinced Helia our ruse would last longer than expected, Dasha would never need to hide again.

When alone with von Uster, I finally sank into a chair and poured myself a glass of wine. "Did you have her followed from the cell?"

He sat next to me. "All the way to her home. She has not stepped outside since the execution."

Why would a Council member stay inside during the most important changes in Tal in the last decade? *It did not matter*.

"Had she obeyed the summons, I would have listened to her justifications. Send the bone soldiers for von Lemerch. She can explain from a cell."

"It will be done tonight."

I emptied the glass. No more half measures. "And block the underground passages. Destroy the flowers and anything else found under the city."

"There is no knowing how stable the buildings above are or how far the tunnels go."

I sighed. "Then send the bone soldiers as far as they get. I don't want to lose anyone but better they fight the undead there than on the streets."

Von Uster tilted his head considering. "What makes you think they'll leave?"

"Besides what I saw of them in Lowtown? Your reports say city guards don't return from patrols. I'm reluctant to blame it all on rebels when I have seen what the priestesses are doing."

The old man smiled. "You do read my reports."

"Upon occasion."

We shared the moment, perhaps both feeling the approaching storm. Then he rose and bowed deeper than ever before.

"I know it's not my place to say so, but I'm glad you showed restraint. I can guess what it cost you to be merciful tonight. It gives me hope."

I could not explain that it had not been mercy, but a change in priorities, a shift in the center of my life. A new purpose. Instead, I nodded in thanks.

When alone, I stepped onto the balcony and let the night wrap around me. Tal's lights spread below, the stars above.

One three-day left until the Day of the Dead. Almost three months since I returned. How many times had my life changed this

summer?

Whispering to the wind, I asked it to blow away the summer heat, closed my eyes, and imagined myself back in the mountains where I had dreamt only of revenge and death, of plots and my own pain.

Somehow, I had become someone else.

It was Alexei and Mariska, Eki and Dasha. Perhaps even von Uster was having an influence. And Vanya…

Laughter where there had been none. Questioning my ignorance and callousness. Touches and passion. That kiss when I caught her in my chambers… I had no longer cared if she was a thief or murderer or spy. Only known her lavender scent and that each touch was felt a thousand times. If I had not cared then, why did I now?

It doesn't matter, a voice inside me chanted. But I was no longer listening. She might be gone from my life forever, but it still mattered. Each moment had mattered.

Ordering her death had been my only possible move for me to retain the throne and her walk away.

But I would carry each memory with me as a light for the dark times surely ahead.

Heading to undress, I brushed my fingers over the worn leather shoe she left behind. It was not much of a memento, but it was more her than any jewel had been. Releasing it, I accepted my place in the bed where my father and grandfather died. The gilded monstrosity was a place for kings. Perhaps it could mold me into one as well.

There was a wedding to prepare, new Council members to select, changes to be made and priestesses to question. I could not push Morovara without starting a civil war. Still, I needed answers to what I had seen under my city.

She ignored my questions in the crypt and every letter since. I might be king, but if she did not answer, I would go to the temple and not leave before she divulged her secrets.

Vanya had told me tomorrow would be a better day. I intended to make her words true.

Vanya

My legs had cramped from sitting on the hard bed for bells. Someone had slid a food tray under my curtain, cold tea still sitting in my cup as Eydis's tight script raced before my eyes.

The books were not official records, but her personal musings. From her writing, I assumed there were more of them. My first one started after she met Herebov and his two sons at a banquet in Denyev. From reading between the lines, Eydis and her mother visited the steppe city to bless a yearly festival. It was already under Herebov's rule. Eydis did not seem to care that her mother spent the nights with him but dismissed his sons as bores. She had been a girl who loved sneaking away into the city searching for hidden treasures. She also wrote about the dead as friends and servants. It seemed this was not the first time the undead walked in Tal.

I raced through descriptions of magic trinkets beyond my imagination and rites for the dead. There were only snippets of Ealhswip as Eydis did not seem close to her mother. Mostly complaints of increased time preparing the dead, necromancy lessons, and orders not to wander.

In the second book, Herebov visited Tal for the first time. Eydis believed he and her mother had exchanged letters. A wedding was announced though the divine rulers of Tal did not marry. Eydis wrote of Vsadnik riders overrunning Tal and griffons—a creature they did not have in the city—circling above.

She fought with her mother. Why could she break all the rules she insisted on for her daughter?

I tried to imagine von Lemerch as I read. A younger version, equally imperial and proud. Or perhaps she had been like me, playing a role all her life and looking for more. Perhaps she had resented the rules as much as her daughter and thought she had found something better.

The only thing that could conquer death is love; that was the explanation she gave Eydis.

This was not the woman with the burning blue eyes who watched me hang. This was someone long dead.

They agreed for Eydis to succeed her mother early, like our old king had to Dimitri. It was our story in inverse. Our families locked in the past.

I had not believed in fate until now.

The wedding was barely mentioned, Eydis's disapproval clear on the page. She commented on Yelena, the mother of Herebov's sons, getting a seat of honor. Eydis's own father was never mentioned.

I skimmed the following entries of how she was prepared to ascend as the divine ruler. There were words I did not know, rituals that meant nothing to me—blessing flowers, stretches, meditation, and what sounded like an almost-death state to commune with the Spirits.

She wrote of a Gate, watching it with fear. It would change her, take something and earn her the Goddess's blessing.

The Day of the Dead—Eydis's final words.

The hairs on my arm stood. Sounds of the temple, magic whispers of living beings, reached my muddled mind.

The sun had risen outside my window. One three-day left until the wedding. Until Ealhswip acted.

I stared at the blank pages.

Another book lay next to me, newer but more worn. The journal of Herebov's last descendant, who killed me and brought me back to life. Again, the parallels twisted inside me like jarring notes finally coming together in harmony.

Herebov killed Ealhswip and took the crown before Eydis could ascend.

Ealhswip, a necromancer blessed by the Death Goddess, somehow returned.

The undead servants Eydis mentioned in passing possibly gathering to continue serving their mistress.

Herebov died. The three children, perhaps my age, came together.

For… *what? What did they do?*

I drank the cold tea, letting the words I'd read become music inside me as I turned them over.

I needed to talk to Morovara. Really talk instead of crying over my lot.

How much of this did Dimitri know?

Unable to hold back, I thumbed through his journal, hoping for clues hidden among the dark thoughts.

My fingers froze as narrowed dark eyes met my own. A portrait, hair disheveled and lips slightly parted in fear or excitement. It was me and not me. A version I had never seen, not even in the perfect mirror in the princess's chambers.

Me from that first night when he caught me, and I thought I would never see him again. I had treated it like a game, the kiss a prize. Being in a lorist's tale had seemed exciting.

If I had known—

I lifted the book into the light to read the squished text at the bottom. *A truer picture. For the Oberwaldian court painter. Better she's on the page than in my mind.*

I slammed the book closed. My heart ached. Everything hurt. My neck remembered the noose. My wrists the chains. My hands the hilt of the knife, the thud as it struck bones which mirrored mine.

My cheeks remembered caresses. My lips kisses.

Gasping breaths and happiness.

Hope.

Then the Spirit on the street. The music singing that my sister remained close. The guilt enough to wish me back into death.

Compelled to move, to act, I grabbed Eydis's journals and ran.

Truths gathered on my tongue. Had death freed me or would telling my own story risk my throat to close again? My steps slowed. Death supposedly broke all bonds, but I had been cursed by the undead divine necromancer ruler. The memory of dying, of fighting for air, locked my jaw as I entered the top floor.

My grandmother was behind the desk, the cat at her side. *Did she sleep as little as the dead?*

From the journals, I knew becoming high priestess changed you somehow. Perhaps Morovara was less human than she seemed. I had no idea of her age. No knowledge of her beyond Lumi rejecting her offers and that she had been High Priestess of Tal for as long as I could remember. I had no reason to trust her, but trust did not come from reason, it came from the heart and necessity; it was a leap into the dark believing they would catch you.

And I was already dead. There was nothing left to lose.

"What happened on the Day of the Dead three hundred years ago? Are there more journals?" I blurted out.

"It seems this is a day for guests," she said as someone cleared his throat behind me.

I spun. He leaned against the wall next to the doorway I had just rushed through, storms in his eyes.

My heart jumped, might have stopped, as everything I was running from crashed together. I remembered his mouth against mine. The taste of his skin. I wanted to repeat it all, uncaring of the audience. I wanted him condemned and hanged like I'd been. And it all hurt like shards slicing into my heart.

Morovara only nodded respectfully. Perhaps when you reached her age it took more than an irate king to ruffle you.

"You were supposed to leave Tal." His serious eyes dug into me, hard face in place. "I ordered it."

I flinched at the hard words, but before I could answer, Morovara rose.

"I'm sure you did not come all the way here to argue with my great-granddaughter. What can the Temple do for the Crown?"

"Your *great-granddaughters* tried to kill me? Infiltrated my life and molded my emotions? Is this another trap? Who better to be behind this all than the high priestess herself?" His beautiful lips twisted as he faced me, something in his eyes breaking. "Is this who you've been unable to betray? Did she curse her own descendant or was that pretend as well?"

"You think I killed my own sister in some kind of ploy?" The tender feelings evaporated. I marched up to him, finally accepting the anger that rested just below the surface. "All this has nothing to do with you or gaining your trust. You're as much a tool as any of us."

"A tool? I'm king."

"Up there on the palace hill before your bone soldiers, you're king. Here you're just a man, like you said you wished to be."

"You know all about my wishes, don't you?"

A cold laugh erupted from my throat. "I never used my magic beyond saving your life, and the only emotions they shared with me were also painted across your face."

"Magic you hid—"

A struck gong cut us both off. We stood close enough to touch. Close enough to kiss or bite.

"Children," Morovara said, "you both came with questions and I'm an old woman with many responsibilities. The dead will wait for no one, not even the king of Tal."

Reminded of his position, Dimitri broke our stare. The cold facade returned but his cheeks and neck remained flushed.

"So are you going to kill me? Twist my mind or imprison me?"

She chuckled. "Ask your real questions. No harm will come to you or my great-granddaughter if I can help it. I'm not your enemy."

Dimitri considered us both and I could see the moment he decided not to push it. He was not dismissing his suspicions but saving them for later, like a piece in King's Conquest sidelined but ready for a future assault. How well I had come to know his gorgeous, unreadable face.

He pulled a folded paper from his coat pocket and passed it to Morovara. I did not need to see it. I had carried it and its accompanying words around too long.

"Priestesses have been coming to the Goddess's Garden for years to obtain this flower. Do you know it?"

"No." She shrugged. "I assume it's poisonous."

"Why would the Temple want a poison?" he asked without explaining.

He turned it in my direction, as if expanding the accusation.

The frail white star flower with black stalk and numerous leaves like thorns—beautiful and innocent looking—filled me with fear. I wanted to ask how he had learned it grew in the palace as he had not recognized it in the cave under Tal. If I had not stolen the letter from the old king, would they have found it sooner?

Morovara seemed to consider his question, or how much she would say.

She nodded to herself before striding to the arch open to the sky.

"We care for the dead, draw the Goddess's attention, and comfort the grieving. Some few come praying we direct the Goddess attention to those who deserve it." She turned, outlined against the bright sky, power seemed to fill her small frame. "Sometimes we listen."

I balked at her words. "You kill people?"

"Me personally, no, but it is part of my duties to review each request."

Dimitri paced, as he so often had while thinking something through. "Every time I think I'm catching up, I learn how little I know of Tal. Dead who walk. Spirits who attack. Assassins in the Temple." He spread his hands in exasperation. "And if someone thought more people needed to die, would you hand them the tools to do so?"

"I'm not sure what you're implying." Morovara's tone hardened. "It's a rare and singular decision. Always a last resort."

"I don't need to imply. This is what I know: For years priestesses have broken into the Women's Tower and extorted this flower from the horticulturalist, a flower that can be used to manufacture a poison that kills when consumed—deaths we assumed were caused by an illness. The reason the Talian plague only affects us is that this is the only place the poison has been used on a large scale. There are assassins in the Temple. Your priestesses have been involved in mass murder. For under my city, priestesses grow the flowers and raise the dead. Across the city a bloody skeleton calls for the people to rise up.

"And—this is personal and might not seem like much in relation to the rest but I still need you to hear it—your priestess, who I trusted with the life of my bride and unborn child, betrayed us to my father. The only thing I do not know, is if you personally are involved or have lost the grip on your subjects."

Silence followed his words.

There were pieces he was missing. Ealhswip and the meeting under the Women's Tower. The endless ocean of restless Spirits. The plague victims' bodies brought to the pyre outside the city where a priestess marked in red stole their Spirits. But if the poison had to be ingested, I had not killed the king. I'd robbed him of knowledge, but the death… I could never know for sure. He could have licked his finger after opening it. Cut it on the paper. Perhaps she had put something inside. But it was not one me. It was all on *her*.

The wind blew through the open room, and I could not tell if it was natural. The late-summer sun shone. Below, a distant flutist practiced.

When Morovara finally moved, I expected the old woman to crumble, perhaps fall back into her chair. Instead, she let out a sigh and nodded.

"I've kept it hidden longer than I could have hoped for. Perhaps it can finally end. I didn't know about the poison or plague—if I had I would have spoken up."

"So speak," he commanded with the voice of a king.

"There are two temple factions—have possibly been since Herebov conquered Tal. When the last divine ruler died, the Temple accepted your ancestor, but a small group declared only the Goddess stood above them and he had not been blessed. They formed a sect willing to do anything. We have tried to eradicate them for generations but in times of hardship their membership grows."

She was leaving a lot out, I knew that, but I could imagine it after Eydis bowed before Herebov. She had never desired to rule. Perhaps she did not know if her mother had been murdered. Perhaps she was glad to give up the responsibility, seek her treasures, and never face the Gate she feared.

"And this sect of yours have been poisoning the citizens and conspiring against the Crown without you saying a word?" Dimitri's voice had cooled, but he was focusing on the wrong things.

Ealhswip was not working with the Temple.

Morovara sighed again. "Someone is always conspiring against the Crown. When there was proof, it was dealt with. We are not all assassins and interrogators—most of our time is spent calming the Spirits. Tal is overflowing. You rightly care for the

living, but I feel the dead."

When hovering between dead and living, so had I. The pressure and darkness drawing them in. "They're used against their will." I swallowed, focusing on getting the words past my fear. "There are so many more than I knew. They cannot leave…"

Morovara nodded. "The dead are being used against Tal. If you would give me access to—"

"You still presume to have my trust when you have done nothing to earn it." Dimitri took back the drawing of the flower. "I expect a list of anyone suspect by morning delivered to Urs von Uster. The Temple is no longer handling this."

"Every priestess is under the protection of the Temple and innocent until proven otherwise. Many women came here seeking sanctuary. I'm not letting the Roja sink its claws into them."

"This is an order from your king."

He gave me one last look before striding out. Hardly a word had been exchanged between us, and those that were had all been in anger, as if we were unable to see past our hurts. After the morning in the basement, I had been glad we had not stopped pushing each other, but now, we seemed to only push each other away.

Morovara caught my hands before I could follow. "Healing or destruction, girl. You can argue later and choose to make tomorrow better today."

Hearing her say my mother's familiar words centered me.

Dimitri and I could never go back, only forward, following this twisted melody between us stretching far into the past and building toward a crescendo. No matter the fighting emotions inside, there were things I needed to tell him.

It was time to face the past.

I squeezed my great-grandmother's hands, words locked in my throat.

"What did you really come to ask me?"

It had not been secrets or even Ealhswip who drove me to run into the temple. There was more in my past I had to face. "If I see Lumi, if she talks to me, is it real?"

"Your sister was stronger than even I knew." My great-grandmother stared into the distance. "Death is not as simple as we preach. Most living and Spirits both require peace. Few have the will to cling to more. Even fewer the power to do so. There's a reason magical bloodlines rarely mix, especially not strong ones. Only those truly desperate for power—like the royal family—ignore the unpredictable results. You and your sister are wild cards. The normal rules don't apply. Trust your heart."

"I'll be back," I promised, and part of me wanted only to stay here. I could be safe. Have a home.

She gave me a push. "Now follow that man. The past might direct the future, but your choices are your own."

I hurried away—knowing my own history, the decisions my mother had made that brought me under Kirill's thumb, the choices my ancestors made that were somehow coming to a peak now—and the shadow of the plan I had when I set up the meeting between the prince and rebels returned.

Hope fluttered as I saw Dimitri ahead of me. I squashed it. Even had he not been set to marry Helia, and we could overcome the betrayals and differences in private, he could never choose me publicly.

Morovara had been right. I needed to choose me. I deserved it all.

But first, I needed to know if the lorists were right and death could truly break a curse.

Dimitri

With controlled breaths and steps, I escaped the woman I'd never expected to see again after I condemned her to death.

She was supposed to be safe. A dream far away. A possibility to cling to in dark moments, and a face to search for in the crowd while I did what needed to be done—what she would have wanted me to do. And instead of saying that, all my insecurities and dark thoughts had spilled out when I saw her with the high priestess.

Her face had been too pale and worn. Too painfully beautiful.

The taste of her kisses, the feel of her skin, burned bright enough that I had to dig my fingers into my palms to not turn around and beg her forgiveness just to hold her for a moment more.

Let her go, the voice inside had said while out loud, I pushed her away. Not that it was needed. I'd already hanged her, surely no more distance was needed between us.

I had only met her when the season started, but she'd felt so right in my arms on Cherny, or safe in my chambers, arguing before the fire. Somehow, she had wormed her way into all my private moments and shattered the cold solitude I wrapped around myself in the mountains.

Nothing besides their slight frames marked her and Morovara as related, but I did not doubt it. There were no such things as coincidences, only connections you did not see. I had been blind to so much and could not allow my hurt feelings to steal the clarity I sought.

In the game played for Tal, I was dangerously behind. Had my father held advantages he never shared?

I could not afford to be distracted from what Morovara had revealed. There were assassins and ancient cults in my city, people with power over death and a vendetta against my family. People who knew I had a daughter.

I had come to the temples dressed as a merchant, the bone soldiers following discreetly. The king of Tal could not walk his own streets openly without a full guard, and I could not spare the fighters, for they were moving under our feet, filling the tunnels.

Before I left the palace, I had been told they'd found nothing—no flowers, undead, or cultists. Only Koshka's haunted eyes assured me it had been more than a nightmare. We were the survivors. She due to the sigils and bones in her lost armor that gave her inhuman strength and speed, me because of the woman I was running from.

The priestesses I passed on the way down the spiraling ziggurat's path did not seem to recognize me, still I did not dare moving faster than a comfortable stroll. A running young man caused complaints and other coarse language; a running king caused panic.

The dark, humid stone corridors inclined down until I reached ground level without a single staircase or door blocking my way. The temples were not built to keep intruders out. They were accessible to all. I had believed respect for the Death Goddess kept the women inside safe, not poisons and control over the Spirits. Would every day provide more evidence of my naivety?

I needed to settle this—find the food, eradicate the poison, declaw the sect, remove Eki and Dasha from their grasp, marry Helia, and provide stability. Then I could risk announcing Dasha as my own and heir, and perhaps after all was said and done, ask for something for myself as well.

With the Day of the Dead three nights away, I had already wasted too much time.

The sunlight hit me with a burst of fresh air, on it rode the rumblings of the people of Tal, like an approaching storm.

More people than normal sat in the temple gardens, their faces hard, clothes worn. How many had come from the abandoned farmsteads? I remembered the empty children's beds. The abandoned toy.

No matter what their parents were planning, I chose to believe they had made it to Tal and found shelter. A successful Day of the Dead and wedding feast would not set everything right, but it would be a start. Already, garlands were hung from rafters

and bright paper lanterns set on windowsills.

Griffon riders had been sent to the clans camped outside the city, offering more than we could afford to buy their cattle. Each one had been told to return after a woman wore the crown of Tal again. Perhaps my father had burned too many bridges. Perhaps they, like the rest of the city, held their breath in anticipation of the Day of the Dead and the wedding.

Now, the riders flew toward the mountains, set on trading with Oberwaldian villages. At least they should not be affected by what was happening in Tal. Helia had assured me her people would be happy to sell us what we needed, but would they make it back in time?

Walking, I felt like I was doing something, like my thoughts and hopes could be pounded into the cobbles, forcing the Wishmaker to hear my pleas. I needed to get to the courthouse. Rebels had been arrested. I had promised myself to sit in judgment—had promised myself to be in ten places at once and make well-informed and just decisions. At least Helia was dealing with the wedding preparations, organizing nobles like a general preparing for battle.

Only when my feet hit the ancient, sleek stones of Pilgrim's Road, did I realize which path I had chosen.

We had followed this road to the bridge, the Roja hiding, bone soldiers gathering at the gatehouse. We had seen the Spirits and thought nothing of it. This was Tal; naturally, death was everywhere. That night I had come close enough to feel the Goddess reaching for me. When I thought it would be my last, I'd only been grateful I kept the woman I cared too much for back. When Tempest stepped in front of me, my heart had stuttered, sure we were both dead.

"You should not have come here without me."

Past and present, night and day, overlapped as I spun and found her leaning against the opposite building. Tired, yes, but also perfect. Whole. Alive. In danger. Dressed like a priestess—too like her sister in this very spot.

"You were supposed to leave." *Supposed to live all our dreams of freedom for both of us.* It had seemed the only way to give her the freedom she sought. One small chance she was now throwing away.

Her plump lips pulled together in the familiar frown I dreamt of kissing away.

"That's all you have to say?"

"I don't hear you apologizing. Among so many other things, you didn't tell me what I was walking into."

She stepped closer, pretend ease forgotten, and my breath caught. "I showed you *me*, saved you and your soldiers. You sentenced and killed me."

"And yet here you stand. Don't you think you've given me every cause to mistrust you?"

"You were the one who took one look at me and declared me your missing bride. I killed my sister to protect you and while I withheld a lot I did not lie."

Her sister. The one irrefutable piece of evidence that did not fit in. Helia had argued for her despite being held captive.

"How do I know you don't work with this cult determined to bring my family down?" I said, unable to stop myself. She always got to me, for good and bad. "Your sister wore white robes and controlled the dead—was she helping them the night they killed Yahontov? Did you?"

Her face crumbled and for the first time, I saw my princess cry and they were angry tears.

"Like I would do anything to help them. You think nobles and royals have few choices. Being poor isn't all freedom and opportunity. I had this or the brothels. I had nothing besides my sister. *She* stole even that from me."

"Your sister?"

Vanya let out a laugh laced with pain, her eyes searching the empty air around us as if she saw the Spirits from that night.

"Lumi lied and kept secrets, but stealing we did together. *Ealhswip*."

She said the final word like the ancient divine ruler's name was a curse, perhaps another Lowtown custom I did not know about.

"And now? Why have you not left?"

Her face twisted in fury, so like how mine had been when I returned to Tal. Before she and Alexei returned me to myself.

"Because I'll make them pay for thinking us disposable. Listen…"

She trailed off as if she did not know how to continue.

I clenched my jaw, hating myself for pushing but I needed to hear her say it. "Did you ever use your magic to shape my feelings?"

"I didn't even know I was a mage until Eki pushed me from the balcony. I guess I should thank her. I used magic instinctively to make us flee under the city, but whatever feelings you might have had for me were all your own."

The vice around my heart loosened despite feeling too much. If she had forced it, I could have hated her. Instead, I felt the opposite. My nails dug into my palms again. I could not have her—could not put her in the line of danger again.

"I still have the shoe. The one you lost…" I do not know why I brought it up, only that I had been unable to throw it away. Perhaps returning it would free me somehow.

"It was my sister's."

Unable to face her grief for the woman who tried to kill me, I turned to study the Grove on the other side of the bridge. In each tree, skeletons played in the wind—a mix of ancient, yellowed bones and gleaming white and gilded ones.

"How are you going to make them pay?" I asked. "Revenge is a slippery slope." I let her see my twisted smile.

She shook her head. "You might believe Tal is yours, but I'm learning it's mine as well. You probably don't think much of my sister—she did what she thought best, I'll leave it at that—but when I only wanted to find somewhere better, she fought to make *here better*—for everyone. She knew she would never leave Tal. Perhaps the part of me that thought she could run died with her. My tomorrow is gone, now it needs to be better for the next one. That starts with the truth—the ugly and unbelievable."

We left the bridge that haunted my sleepless nights, as if stepping past our differences.

"You're going to tell me things without games or magic?"

We strolled in daylight as we never had before, the street slowly filling, and her cocky smile did more than the sun to diffuse my dark memories. With her, alive and arguing, everything seemed a new adventure. No matter what she had to say, I wanted to extend our final conversation.

She nodded, jaw clenched. A flicker of discomfort reappeared inside me. Truth was never easy.

"To repay my debt to Kirill, my stepfather who killed Alexei, I became a thief."

She paused, breathless, hands hovering above her neck, as if expecting the curse to awaken.

In the Archive, she fell, ashen and gasping. This time, I raised my hands to catch her, knowing I would carry her to the hospital again, the consequences of her returning to life in the king's arms be damned.

She blinked, gulped down air, and laughed.

It rang like chimes, clear and pure, as relief radiated from her emerald eyes. Hawkers readying their booths turned to stare as she did a pirouette—effortless and perfect—the priestess's robe flaring.

"It's gone." She grabbed my still raised hands, a spark that had nothing to do with magic shooting toward my constricting chest. Watching her smile, I was the one robbed of breath.

"You can talk?"

"It seems death does free you. You cannot believe how it feels to speak without fear. To not guard my own thoughts." She raised our joint arms, shouting, "I'm a thief!"

"Then stay away," a merchant answered while others gave us the side-eye, though at least one laughed.

"I never thought I would say that with joy," she murmured in a voice just for me.

My lips relaxed into my first genuine smile since I left her on the steppe. "So, you're a thief."

"Only you wouldn't recognize one when catching her with the stolen goods in hand."

I thought back as she retreated from my arms. "The crown."

She nodded. "Councilwoman von Lemerch hired me and my sister to steal the female glass crown, but I couldn't get away with it—even after you conveniently dropped it at my feet."

I stumbled. "Von Lemerch is behind this?"

"She is." Vanya hesitated as if picking her words carefully. "I believe she leads the sect Morovara spoke off, that she worked with Flora von Heskin to coerce Helia into marrying you wearing the fake crown. They failed and needed a replacement… I don't know how she found me and my sister. I do know, she gave us a job to test us, or perhaps to see if her friends thought we resembled the princess as well."

"Friends?"

Already, I was adding names to my mental list.

"The von Mekelns." She swallowed, lowering her voice to a whisper. "And Ekatarina. I saw her with von Lemerch in the crypt under the Tower. That's what she wants—"

"I know of Eki. She supplied the priestesses with the flowers."

"Then you have arrested her already?"

"We spoke. She had a good reason."

Vanya's face twisted in anger. "I killed to protect you. You knew the curse stopped me from speaking. Still, you had me arrested and executed. She *had a good reason* for helping to manufacture the plague?"

Her rage washed over me. I absorbed and accepted it, wishing our stolen moment on the steppe had been the memory I would carry with me. Not the bridge and trial. Not this.

I was a king and despite only having spent a moment with my daughter, a father. I should not even be this close to a heart turner, no matter what I felt. My wishes and feelings no longer mattered. After seeing Dasha's questioning eyes, I could not even complain to the Wishmaker. The god had given me more than I could ever have hoped for. Love had never been on the table.

"I cannot speak of it." Could do nothing to risk Dasha of the serious eyes.

"But you expect everything from me?"

"I expected you to run. Expected you to be a princess and pawn. You never do what I expect."

She marched away.

I followed, unable to let go, so when she spun in place, we crashed into each other. She flinched at my touch as I steadied her, reveling in holding her, no matter how short. A twisted part of me delighted in the anger in her eyes. In prison and court,

they had been dead. This was the wild creature inside she had not been able to hide behind pretty dresses. The priestess's robe did not matter. She could wear anything or nothing, for she was magnificent.

"I'm not saying this for you," she snapped. "This is for Tal and because I promised myself that if I ever got a chance, I would tell you everything. I'm done breaking promises, especially those I've made myself."

"Then talk." We stood close enough that the rest of the world disappeared.

"They are planning to kill you and Helia on the Day of the Dead, after the marriage and you have opened something in the crypt. The fake crown is supposed to stop the magic—I don't know how. You still have the real one I returned?"

"In my closet."

"Will you marry despite already being king?"

I wanted to say "no." That I wanted no one besides her—by my side, in my bed, in my life. But Dasha's safety and Morovara's family curse shaped my words instead.

"Tal needs stability. Now more than ever. Oberwalden is providing food, trade agreements."

She snorted. "Money. Don't you have enough? Well, it's your life to risk. Just keep her away from the crypt."

"Von Lemerch? She won't be a problem."

Unease turned the glass-green eyes into shadowed moss as Vanya blinked up at me. "You know?"

"Since she visited you after the trial, the Roja has been following her."

"You had me watched? Always the tactician. You would have liked my sister. If you hadn't left me on the steppe, she would have found a way to hold me back. Both of you, bringing your own people, preparing for a fight you made inevitable."

She shook her head and walked away slowly enough for me to stay at her side this time. In silent agreement, we steered our steps to North's Place and the von Lemerch mansion.

Three decades ago, von Lemerch had arrived from Denyev and bought it. Quickly thereafter she was voted into the Council by the nobles. They called her neutral and measured. A steadying force who stayed out of squabbles. She took my father's side when needed but kept away from the palace and parties, preventing her from being labeled a royalist.

If I had to pick someone working with the rebels, it would never have been her. She had played her pieces well until the end.

We arrived on 9th Street, stopping as her manor and the stationed guards came into view. Rojas were still going through her books and papers—the little that had been left.

Vanya shook her head. "I came here so many times, hoping to see something I could bring back to you despite the curse. There was barely anyone entering or exiting, only her black coach waiting."

I allowed myself to sidle closer, her shoulder brushing my arm. "That's because she had access to the tunnels from her basement, same as the one we exited."

Another memory I wanted to carry with me. Somehow, my enemies had managed to taint even that.

"I figured. Tried to steer us this way under the city…"

"It no longer matters. Bone soldiers rushed her manor at dawn. All servants and guards are being questioned. The tunnels are being searched and sealed as we speak. There is nothing more that she can do."

"You didn't find her? Arrest her?" The fear in Vanya's voice made me want to wrap her in my arms. What von Lemerch had done to her would never be forgiven.

"You don't have to fear her anymore. She has fled. Her power came from moving unseen, pulling our strings. We will work with the Temple to root out the priestesses abusing their powers as well, but if they move against us in the open, they'll be killed on sight. Von Lemerch is probably on her way back to Denyev to lick her wounds."

"Threats mean nothing to her. She's already dead." Vanya grabbed my coat collar, pulling me down to her until our noses almost touched. "She's no more alive than the walking corpses who attacked us. She's Ealhswip. She'll stop at nothing to reclaim her power."

I heard her words, tried to find a hidden meaning, a metaphor that made sense.

"Stasia von Lemerch is a human—a hidden mage perhaps, for Denyev doesn't share their records with Tal—but just an old woman. She can curse us, if she has curses left, but she's not…"

I could not even breathe life into her outlandish claim. The ancient divine ruler coming back from the grave to exact vengeance? Vanya seemed the same, if perhaps more serious, but she had been through a lot. Death… And mage's sickness could have twisted her mind after the bridge…

"Don't look at me like that," she snapped, knuckles whitening. "You're as bad as my sister. That's the reason the priestesses follow her. Herebov seduced and murdered her, and she has been here since."

Should I wrap my arms around her or step away? Could a healer help?

"Is this why you've not run?"

"I'm not delusional," she growled. "Ask Morovara. Ask those servants you captured and Flora von Heskin if they believe von Lemerch human."

The sun sank, our shadows long enough to reach the manor. My time was running out.

"If there's any way I can help—" I started as a Spirit coalesced beside her.

I flinched away as it wrapped too-solid hands around her, my nightmares of the bridge returning.
Together, they illuminated the night.

Vanya

Warmth bloomed inside as I was enveloped in an embrace as cold as a winter storm. Too long had she avoided my touch. Death might separate us, but inside the magic, we became one.

The last of Popova's curse and my own walls crumbled. White light flared, too bright to see, and when the twilight returned, my sister was in my arms.

We broke apart, only hands touching, and studied each other. She remained, a core of unearthly light steadily shining inside, but any resemblance to normal Spirits ended there. Each pane of her face was as in life—it seemed death did not heal all scars—and her clothes, down to the coat buttons were recreated. Her hair remained as short as it had in death, brushing her chin. Her hands were solid in mine.

"You're real." It came out as a sob. "You're impossible."

She smiled, and my heart broke and healed all at once.

The eerie glow illuminated Dimitri's face from below, showcasing terror and anger.

"Get away from her," he snapped.

I was not sure which one of us he meant.

Lumi, her emotions flowing through me, sneered. "She's been mine since before birth. You're all the same. Staking a claim. Using and discarding."

"You tried to kill me."

She scoffed, sounding completely alive. "Like you wouldn't have killed me. You hung my sister while nobles who murder commoners aren't even brought before the court. I don't regret attacking you. Only that my sister was caught in the middle. She was never supposed to be part of this." She turned to me, regret and sorrow replacing her anger. "I was supposed to clean away the past so you could build a future. I failed, but you can still get away from here."

"Can everyone stop telling me to run?" I said, unable to muster the fear and awe her Spirit speaking should have brought. "Even in death, you try to control the situation. How about you help me instead?"

Since she appeared like a giant mage light imploding, the guards at von Lemerch's manor had been shouting. We would soon have company.

Lumi gave Dimitri a suspicious look. "I'll tell you what I know but I won't help him." Something inside her softened. "Love blinds everyone."

"Like I would trust your words," he said, cutting off my objections both to her love declaration and distrust.

"Can't you two stop fighting?"

This was not the place to voice a lifetime of grievances.

Lumi's magic, somehow mixing with mine, sang of Spirits approaching, death coating Tal, while mine played an accompanying tune, the guards' approaching steps beating inside me.

A summer party lit up the nearest manor, nobles on the lawns already playing Day of the Dead games of chance on tables lit by colored paper lanterns, cheerful and unknowing of the death so close. Had they seen the Spirit light? The music had quieted, the tension running through Tal too high for even nobles to ignore.

"We have to go."

The fear that had so far been absent slammed into me. I would not be caught again. Locked up. Judged. Hung.

My actions might result in death, but it would be my own decision.

"The dead walk Tal," Lumi said, ignoring me. "And they never leave. If the body is not shed of their flesh, if Spirits are not calmed and cling to life, they can rise. And mages, they're stronger than any others… You cannot fight this, V."

"How do we kill them?" Dimitri asked, apparently able to put aside his dislike after all. I saw the king he'd become in his

stance. A determination that had sometimes surfaced when he previously talked of revenge.

Lumi's shining form shrugged. "I've never seen anything other than magic touch them. Possibly fire or dismemberment. Are you willing to burn down your city in the process? The fire already got away once."

The answering silence said enough. He could not take the risk.

"Just call off the wedding. Delay the festival. *Find her*." Even as the words left me, I knew how they sounded. Like the jilted lover. The discarded one.

"I didn't choose this. I told you it's too late to stop."

There was pain in his voice that I forced myself to ignore. "This isn't about me. It's about Tal. About you." *Your life.*

"Tempest, please don't push this. Tal expects a queen. And there are parts of being the king of Tal I cannot speak of. If Solovyova is right, not marrying is even worse."

"Who do you think I'll tell?"

"A promise is a promise independent of the intention in breaking it. Ask Morovara if you want to know. She was there, listening in."

Lumi tugged at something inside me, her worry rising.

"What's happening?" I asked, as the soldiers talked to one of the men who had followed Dimitri and me through the city, believing I did not see them. I was glad he brought guards, less so that they had seen me, and I did not know what they were telling the others.

"We should leave. Now." I was already retreating.

Dimitri remained a solid silhouette against Lumi's light.

"Are you coming?" I asked. *Will you believe me? Listen?*

"This is not your world, Tempest. I—I wish it could be you. That the world was different than it is. It is not. You're a thief. I'm a king. Or I'm trying to be."

"That's it?" I was no longer sure why I argued, only that we could do nothing else, perpetually perched on opposite sides. I had wanted to run, was a thief, and had certainly not been arguing for him to marry me.

"That's all it can be."

I retreated another step. "What you still do not understand is that *this*"—I spread my arms wide—"does not belong to the people celebrating behind their gates and walls any more than it belongs to the rest of us. You can only be king with citizens. I'm not leaving Tal. I don't know why I thought I ever could. I tried to tell you… *Even in the final moment, be on your guard*. She'll come for you in the crypt."

We stared at each other across the road. Instead of fighting or kissing, which could have closed the distance between us, I walked away from North's Place and him.

The time for pretenses was over. So was the time for allowing others to decide my life and tomorrow.

Lumi matched my speed, quietly waiting until alone before halting me with an unnaturally cold but seemingly solid hand.

"V, you leaving and living a long and boring life was the one thing me and that man could agree on."

"Like I ever wanted boring."

"You always wanted to leave though."

"How about you tell me what you know instead of what to do? Have I not earned your trust?"

"It was him I could never trust, not you."

"And now I'll have to live my whole life with the memory of killing you."

She flinched away. Such a living reaction. My heart squeezed. She was here but she was dead.

"I'm sorry." She swallowed. "So sorry I ever blamed you—I broke the curse on my powers by wanting to kill more than anything else." Her feelings mixed with mine, memory fragments drifting through the bond. Someone held her down. Terror and anger swallowed her, as she welcomed death if it meant taking her enemies down with her. "I could no longer bear to see you so *happy*," she whispered, voice breaking.

"I wasn't happy," I said, but her memories leached away the anger. "I put on a front for you—all I wanted was for it to be like it'd always been."

"V… we all change. Look at you. I barely recognize you. You're stronger than I ever knew. Stronger than me, bending instead of snapping."

I pulled her luminescent shape into a desperate hug. "I always thought you the strong one. When you died— When I killed—"

She placed a hand on my cheek. "Let's be strong together."

Pressed close, feeling her inside me and in my arms, I quietly asked, "Why did you do it? Dress like a priestess. Attack him. Why couldn't we have all worked together?"

She sighed. "Joined forces might be unbeatable but divide and conquer is the oldest tactic there is, especially when all sides are more powerful than your own. The cost of trust too high. My way the prince would have died. There would have been evidence and witnesses leading it back to Ealhswip and her cult—I gathered enough while I watched over Helia. The needed questions would have been asked of Morovara. I saw one impossible chance and could not let it pass me by."

"You should have told me."

Lumi stepped back with a hand on each of my shoulders, shining eyes seeming to see into my very Spirit. "And would you have listened to sense?"

Was her plan the more sensible one? Yes. Would I have listened? No. "That doesn't mean it was the right way to go."

She nodded slowly. "Now we do it your way, V. Together."

I turned toward my Tal—the rivers and bridges, bones and temples, whorehouses and gambling dens, the leaning apartment buildings, and mud streets.

When planning the meeting between her and Dimitri, I had wanted to bring something to the table. They all thought they could do it alone. I planned and plotted. But neither was my strength.

Mother taught me kindness. To listen and join people together.

I'd watched neighbors' children for a smile. Danced for a meal. I had looked to others for answers. Along the way, I had lost faith in my own ideas. But I did not need fancy invites or their approval.

I would not give up before I'd even tried.

We had three days to make a difference. If I could be convinced to fight for this place, anyone could.

We walked into the night. Two girls, one alive, one dead; one solid, one hovering. As we passed, people stopped and prayed. Dropped to their knees and whispered of the coming Goddess and the dead walking.

My skin itched, screaming for me to hide from the many eyes, but we would need all the advantages we could get. Belief mattered. Ealhswip had shaped the story for too long. The people flocking to the street were not collateral damage. It was time we took back Tal.

I channeled the princess I had been imitating and strode proud, still in the borrowed priestess's robe, telling them to listen to the high priestess, reject the bloody drawings, and choose kindness when they could.

* * *

The doorbell rang.

I was back at Mandible Street in the house I'd hated and called home. The place I had been at my most powerless, its weight pressing me down. I had imagined this meeting taking place in the palace, or somewhere neutral like the courthouse or theater, but it had finally reopened and, like so many times before, this was all I had.

I clutched my coat with sweaty palms, knowing I should answer the door, but unable to move.

We were a day away from the Day of the Dead. The sun would rise twice more, and one way or another, it would be over.

I had used Dimitri's coins to send new invites, pay the street cleaners and other urchins and invisibles to spy, the day laborers to guard against the seeming undead, and most expensive of all, the Sigil Guild to protect as many homes and streets from the Spirits as possible. Whatever Dimitri believed, on the Day of the Dead, they would come. Ealhswip needed fresh dead, and Tal was overflowing with people no one would miss.

Between the frantic action, Lumi and I had talked like we had not for years. We shared not only information but tales of our lives, forgiving each other. She had kept things from me and paid more than enough for her decisions. Our deaths brought me back to my sister.

The city was full of rumors that the king was stockpiling food in a warehouse in Gateways. If it did not arrive at the festival, Tal would blow like a mad fire bearer.

The bell rang again.

Lana kicked my leg when I still did not move. After I explained my reasons and showed the invite list with my dead twin at my shoulder, she had been surprisingly amenable to opening her home for this meeting.

This was a place for deals to be made—and perhaps even Svetlana's rules could be bent when her dead stepsister did the arguing.

I wore plain but well-made pants and coat and new boots—my one indulgence. If anyone was going to listen, I could not be dressed in rags or borrowed robes, and I would not risk the delicate peace with my stepsister by wearing her clothes.

When it rang a third time, I rushed, suddenly afraid they would just leave. On the other side of the front door, I came face-to-face with a friend I had not thought to see again.

"You came," I stuttered as Mariska enveloped me in an embrace. A gray cloak, probably suffocating in the end-of-summer heat, covered her healer's reds. As Dimitri had been out of the question, she would have to represent the palace and nobility.

"You just had to ask. Though your message was cryptic enough."

Someone cleared her throat behind her, and I straightened my back, well-versed in what happened if I disappointed in this house.

Popova, together with the towering grandson who had recognized me when the city burned, stood behind Mariska. I showed them inside as a silver coach pulled by two perfectly white horses, bones braided into their manes, turned onto the street. My great-grandmother was not circumspect. By morning, all would know the high priestess had visited the moneylender's house.

She stepped out leaning on a cane, reminding me of meeting von Lemerch in this house. Had Ealhswip modeled her persona on one of the most powerful women in Tal?

As Morovara paused in the door, I dipped my head. Our familiarity was too new, she too much of an otherworldly power.

She lifted my chin with a warm hand.

"We're family. That doesn't mean I'll agree to whatever you say tonight, but it does mean you can say it looking into my eyes, never fearing reprisals." Her eyes drifted over my shoulder. "Ask that one. She's called me all kinds of names."

Lumi's amusement slipped through our bond. She was invisible again but since our magic mixed, I felt her always at my side. I should not be surprised if Morovara had known Lumi was here before her carriage turned onto the street.

"Then I apologize in her place. It would not be the first time." I smiled and it felt strange on my face. *When was the last time I thought of my sister with happiness?*

The last guest was someone Svetlana had recommended, and the only person I had never previously met.

The beauty striding down the street in a ball gown worthy of the palace was not what I expected. She smiled at the children, stepped in the mud without care, and had soot stains across her cheek and nose.

Nataliya von Paran, the much younger wife of the head of the Merchant's Guild, who supposedly had her husband wrapped around her finger, looked me up and down before sweeping past as if she owned the house. Without Dimitri's signature on the invite, I had not dared to approach her husband with my wild story, but perhaps this was even better.

"Are we in the study or dining room?" she called back as I locked the door and hurried after.

"In here," Lana answered from the sitting room. "Seems I'm out a servant so you must pour your own wine. My stepsister insisted this gathering remain private."

I stopped outside the doorway, world shifting again.

Lumi's spectral hand found mine. That might be the first time Svetlana referred to me as any kind of sister, and to do so before some of the most powerful women in Tal… If I had needed a sign from the Wishmaker that anything was possible, this was it.

I let go of my sister's hand and entered with the poise of a princess and the attitude of a thief.

"Tal's in trouble. We're going to save it."

Five heads snapped in my direction. The women had seated themselves in the comfortable chairs spread across the room. Lana and Nataliya by the wine, Morovara and Popova opposite each other—the tension between them tangible—while Mariska, the highest ranking one here, squirmed between them.

"It's polite to offer welcome," Popova said as her grandson entered from the kitchen with a cup of tea for her. "Especially as I am here under false pretenses. Your message spoke of opportunities, not meaningless heroics."

Morovara scoffed. "You would think anything that benefits others *meaningless*."

"I was told there would be money to be had." Nataliya smiled sharply. "And Svetlana Kirillovna never jokes about money."

So perhaps the invites had been less direct than I had imagined, lacking the perfect plan I'd hoped Lumi and Dimitri could put together.

I cleared my throat. No one listened. Maybe it had been stupid to think I could do this. That anyone would hear me out. Dimitri had not.

"You're not alone," I heard whispered as Lumi's hand found mine again.

"Will you ignore me as well?" she then said out loud, her voice cold as death.

All eyes snapped to us.

The reactions ranged from Morovara's calm to Lana's faint horror and Popova's grief. Their feelings a distracting melody, the most surprising Nataliya's notes of fascination.

"We all want something," I said. "I want to honor my sister and what she tried to do for Tal. Moreover, I want to make tomorrow better. You are here because you control the dead, the rebels, have the funds and know how to take advantage of a business opportunity." I turned to Mariska. "And to show that this is not a conspiracy against the Crown.

"Tomorrow night the dead will walk. You've all heard the rumors of the Goddess—only terror is coming." I swallowed. "They have grown poison and gathered all the food usually sold at the festival. They're animating corpses and amassing the Spirits. When ready, they'll attack the living in every way they can and take Tal for their own."

"Is that possible?" Mariska asked.

"With enough magic, for a little while, yes. It has happened before." Morovara sounded tired. "Until the Spirits can move on, it will happen again."

The emotions in the room shifted and I knew even Popova was listening behind her teacup.

"The priestesses following this twisted view of the Goddess will attack the royal wedding and anyone celebrating it," Lumi continued. "There was a reason you agreed I should watch them, then halt them if possible. You know their offers of cooperation are lies."

Popova clicked her tongue. "They asked that those loyal stay inside and don't participate in the festivities."

I let the magic seep into her, focusing on the notes of deception. "What are you hiding?"

She narrowed her eyes. "More than you'll know in a lifetime, girl."

"They've been paid off," Lana said, and I could hear the smile behind her covered face. "No other way she would let an

opportunity of unrest pass. The food has to go somewhere."

Nataliya perked up. "The missing goods? They would fetch a good price. I heard the king has hidden them away though. That he is the reason prices have been increasing as he claimed it all for the nobles."

"She's supposed to give it to us to distribute," Popova said, and this time I tasted only truth. "With it, we would be able to recruit. To rebuild Lowtown."

"Dimi will never let it go." Mariska shrank as all the eyes hit her. "We're testing it for poison but there isn't enough time."

"Will he hold it and watch the people starve?"

"They're animating the dead," I said. "Bringing back a theocracy. Killed any free farmers who rejected their offers and abuse the dead. What makes you think they'll keep their word to you?"

Their greed and doubt told me I had yet to convince them. But for once, my sister and I were on the same side.

"They manufactured the plague," Lumi said. "Grew a poison and spread it through Tal. They only wish to rule the dead. You're fools to follow now and think you can fight later—and I would know, because I was a fool as well. Any food they give you will be poisoned—removing the resistance and supplying them with fighters for the night. You would be the one killing Tal."

"So, what do you propose we do? We cannot fight the dead," Popova said, and I could feel the others' agreement.

"The high priestess with the power of the Temple can." I looked at my great-grandmother. "And we need to ensure people stay away from the food and celebrations."

"The palace is buying up anything they can find," Mariska interjected with surprising strength. "It'll be safe."

"Von Lemerch is behind it all. What makes you think a councilwoman would not have the contacts to get to whatever is stored in the royal warehouses?" Lumi asked derisively. "And people are starving, expecting a feast. They'll not stay away from the food, even if it is not delivered to the night market. Whoever the king left to guard it will not be enough."

"Then we need to supply them with an option." I turned to Lana, Nataliya, and Popova. "You have money and I'm sure the merchants and smugglers have kept back something to sell themselves. Supply the barges and drink halls and homes, and people will stay away from the festival. Especially, if we pay for drinks to flow."

Lana shook her head. "My father already sank too much money into this."

"And this is your only chance to make it back," I argued. "She swore to reward my sister in gold as she ordered me to play the princess. Still, I heard her plot our murder myself. You'll all be washed away in the approaching storm."

Tal's music rose to a pitch inside me.

It was ready to boil over.

Implode.

"Say I have some contacts among the clans who refuse to deal with the royals," Nataliya said. "Who'll repay the loans? We're not feeding the city at our own cost. Prices will be higher than ever as all sides have been scrambling for months. Each barge only kept what it could, each merchant enough to get themselves through the season."

"The Crown will pay."

Mariska stood between Popova and Morovara, her red robe reminding me of the bleeding skeleton painted on walls and trees.

"You have such authority?" Lana asked, avarice lighting her eyes. Suddenly she was all her father's daughter.

"Dimi will honor it, or my own family will." She turned to me, eyes fierce. "I trust you now like I did the first day."

Morovara cleared her throat. "You make a good argument, Great-granddaughter, but why would the Temple risk itself? Most of us are weak… I'm not sure we would win a direct confrontation we have avoided for centuries."

"But this time you won't be hidden or alone. When they approach the palace, Popova's rebels could help you handle the humans, while you focus on the dead. As for why—I was told to ask you why there must be a royal wedding on the Day of the Dead. What do they all want?"

All eyes locked on the high priestess as she pursed her lips. Tension and expectation thick enough for me to grab and shape filled the air. Part of me itched to bend it into trust and belief, something positive bonding these women together. But it would be artificial. Another lie. Magic, like everything else, came with choices. I would listen to the world, not force it into what I thought it should be.

"We're not getting any younger," Popova said. "I know you've been clamoring at the palace for decades over some historical slight."

Morovara narrowed her eyes at the other woman. "There's a secret trust that comes with being the high priestess of the Death Goddess. Betraying them to you is not a small thing. But my great-granddaughter is right, these are desperate times. And perhaps they can also be times of opportunities. Swear secrecy and I'll reveal the lies Tal's monarchy are built on."

Her sharp eyes dug into us one by one and as each swore, I listened to the magic in their words, hearing the truth.

Finally, the eyes landed on me and Lumi.

"I swear," we said together. "All spoke truth as they believe it."

"You can tell that?" Nataliya asked with a shrewd look.

I gave a quick nod but focused on Morovara. The last piece of this puzzle was close enough to see the jagged edges—the face of the Goddess in the crypt under the palace. The glass crown on my head. Morovara could tell me what it all meant.

"The dead have come to Tal for as long as we have written records. Few ask why. Today even the average priestess doesn't learn the truth. For them, it is as it has always been.

"Through the Gate was to the Goddess's realm, deep under the Women's Tower, which used to be the Temple's holiest building, those who were ready passed into her realm. When Herebov took Tal, Ealhswip broke the very balance she had sworn to protect as she returned and took his life. But she did not return alone. We don't know why the Goddess allowed it, only that it happened, and that the divine ruler did not return the same."

"She burns cold," I whispered, recalling Ealhswip's fiery eyes and the freezing death inside her.

Morovara nodded. "With vengeance they say. To stop the dead overwhelming the living her own daughter, the first high priestess to swear allegiance to the Crown, and one of the greatest sigil crafters ever known, offered to help Herebov's oldest son, the new king. The records tell of desperate times where each night brought death, so together they did something rash—they blocked the Gate to the Goddess in both directions."

"And the dead?" Lumi asked.

"They're trapped."

The story sank into me, closing the gap between Eydis's journals and Ealhswip's plans. My voice shook as I spoke. "What happens if she opens the Gate again?"

"Things meant for death only do one thing. It's said they hunger for the life they cannot have."

"And the crowns?"

"Even the most powerful sigils cannot last generations as the magic put into them by the mage diminishes. Through the glass crowns and vows of protection on the Day of the Dead, when the Goddess's power is the strongest, the ruling royals tie their own magic to them. I, like each high priestess before me for the last two hundred years, have asked to send their representative and find a way to restore the balance. Each wedding strengthens the sigils—we do not know what would happen if they broke on their own. You want my help in fighting the dead? Attempt to repair the balance—that's my price for what is happening on the streets is nothing compared to the destruction that will come otherwise."

Mariska straightened and I saw the princess she had been trained to be. "I can plead your case to my cousin. With enough time, he'll want to help."

"That's not what she meant." Lumi's determination mixed with anger. "I kept my sister away from you despite your sweet words of family and belonging, knowing it was only a matter of time before you found a way to use us for your own gain. Even I didn't expect the request for her to throw her life away would come this fast."

I placed a hand on her cold shoulder. "That's my choice to make. You followed your beliefs and I have not accused you. We both do what we need to do." I turned to my great-grandmother and high priestess. "You think I can restore this balance because we are related? I know nothing of necromancy or sigils."

"You two are abnormalities, death and life in one." Her eyes took me and my sister in, her point never truer. "If I knew another way, I would not ask. I've never seen the Gate. The only direction I can give is that magic is built to protect against outside attack—wear the crown, bond with it, and it'll show you the way. The balance wants to be restored. I'm afraid we've waited too long. Too few Spirits listen to our calming song and the clicking of the bones for the call to rise against the living."

Lumi turned to Popova. "Send someone with her at least. You owe me that much."

The old woman inclined her head, and I wondered what had passed between them during the previous two years.

"I'll tell them it's your last wish," she said. "Some will volunteer."

Lumi smiled. "They'd better, or I'll haunt them no matter what happens."

My mother had struck her deal with Kirill, perhaps in this very room, setting the path for my life. Now, I was doing the same, promising my own body to save others.

I stepped into the center, accepting attention and leadership I'd never wanted. "I'll leave from the Bone Grove for the palace at sundown with whoever is willing to help. Nataliya and Lana will buy and distribute any food they can get. Everyone spreading the word to stay inside." I lowered my voice, the commanding tones wavering. "Mariska, warn him the dead are coming. Ask him to destroy all food. Tell him of Ealhswip."

She nodded. We both knew it was too late for him listen—he had done what he thought right. I needed to do the same.

I swallowed, then gave voice to the song of Tal I'd danced to my entire life.

"Neither side in this care about collateral damage. We have been poisoned and burned, stolen from, and pushed down. If we want tomorrow to be better, we must do it ourselves."

One by one, these powerful women nodded at my words. I had not asked for this, but somehow, I had known it would come down to me. I knew the palace. I knew the crypt. I should have been the bride.

At least Lumi would not leave my side this time.

We were not damsels sitting around waiting to be rescued or chosen. We had to choose ourselves and our neighbors and our city, hoping Tal would recall what it truly meant to be for all.

Dead and alive, we were fighting for our future.
I had crashed the engagement ball, time to ruin the wedding.

Dimitri

The sun sank outside the king's chambers, and the darkness inside was better suited to an execution than a wedding. Next to the heirlooms of my line, my personal possessions still seemed as out of place as me. There was too much gold, even parts of the fireplace gilded.

A separate sitting room contained everything Alexei left behind. I had written to his family, my stilted words conveying my condolences but none of what happened that night. He died a hero. Would receive the highest honors, the Talian Rose, and that was it. I could not even inform them where his bones were hung. Even von Uster had not found a trace of the body in the chaos after the fire.

In a weak moment, I had read Alexei's correspondence—letters to a woman, mentions of a daughter. Had he not told me because of my grief? I'd been a miserable friend. He would have despised how I left things with Vanya. Or laughed at me for ordering her to stay out of danger, expecting a different outcome than last time.

The night I met Tempest, I had mocked the painter, watched her thinner lips, and remembered the feel of the real woman against me. Dark hair lay piled on top of her head, features innocent. I had spent bells wondering how they made her sit still for so long. It was a particularly good portrait of Helia von Heskin but had failed to capture Vanya.

I should not think of another woman on my wedding day, but it would have been impossible not to even if I had not returned to my rooms to bathe and dress and found Helia's portrait in the place of honor on the mantle—my future wife.

But she was everywhere.

On the street in North's Place, we had been so painfully close. My muscles had cramped as I refrained from holding her. At letting her walk away.

Dreaming since, I saw her dead sister's face, slack and scarred, and woke bathed in sweat searching for Tempest's body at my side. I had not slept a full night since she left my bed the morning of the fire.

I lifted the painting, feeling the uneven structure of the black against the creme background under my calloused fingers.

Only three things mattered: she had never been mine, she was alive, and no one knew of her existence. If only she had run like a sensible person.

The wedding was a racing coach too late to stop. The momentum had to carry me to the other side, and then I could pick up the pieces.

Von Lemerch was still out there.

Ealhswip.

I could not believe it, though Vanya was somehow convinced. She and I had both been deceived too many times. And using as much magic as she had often led to delusions. Not that it mattered. The councilwoman was gone.

I let the fine painting fall into the hungry flames. When I returned to Tal, I kept the fires lit to remind me of my vengeance, and flinched at each snap and crackle. Now, the flames had lost their power despite the memory of the fire consuming Tal, me and Alexei standing side by side, for Vanya saving me—the moment of dancing and laughing she had shared as I lay dying in the rain—overrode it all.

I opened the closet to retrieve my ceremonial coat, only to spot the single shoe sitting alone on the top shelf. The broken string—red for luck—explained how she had lost it. Knowing it was her sister's, the woman who had tried to kill me, I had even less reason to keep it. But it was the only thing I had that connected me to the girl I argued and flew with. Who made me forget the world and propriety.

My fingers traced the worn but well-made leather.

Before I had processed the decision, the rashness of leaving the palace on my own wedding day to brave the celebratory chaos of the Day of the Dead and angry mobs, I shrugged into my least ornate coat and tucked the shoe awkwardly into the

pocket.

Maybe if I returned it, if I saw her one last time and said a proper goodbye, knowing she was not out risking her life, I would be able to sit beside Helia today without imagining another.

Koshka had stood guard outside my door, and for once, shadowed me without question when I left. Her silent steps reminded me of Yahontov and all who followed me. I had to make their dedication and sacrifices worth it. A king was meant to serve. Still, I could not stop myself from leaving.

The added security should have made it hard to leave the palace unnoticed, but the final rush to get everything ready meant more people than ever were coming and going. Any guard who could be spared was at the warehouses in Gateways where we had stacked the food found in the tunnels alongside what we had managed to purchase. The promised goods from Oberwalden had yet to arrive.

In the courtyard, we had the misfortune to run straight into Nikolai. From his disheveled clothing, he was returning after a night of early celebration.

He blinked at me and ignored Koshka. "Running, are you?"

"Only last-minute preparations."

"No one would fault you. After the death of your father and exchange of the bride. A bit late though."

"It's not like that," I snapped.

"Riska was looking for you." He yawned. "Something about the dead and gold and danger and the wedding."

I backed up with a hand covering the shoe. Others were turning toward us. "I'll see her tonight."

At any moment, someone too important to ignore would approach and my opportunity would be lost. Nikolai waved me on as if he did not care. If something happened to me, this man—who thought life was one long party—would be king. Another reason to stay safe inside the palace walls.

Instead, I hurried.

During the trial, the Roja had investigated the house on Mandible Street. When I insisted, they had also given me directions on how to find it. In weak moments, I charted the possible routes from the palace to Lowtown on my maps—the fastest, the safest, the most circumspect—dreaming of showing up at her door.

We were crossing into Lowtown when Koshka grabbed my arm. Until now, I had disregarded her questioning looks. I could not ignore a grip strong enough to hold a griffon.

"You're marrying the Oberwaldian princess."

I nodded impatiently. "That's why we must hurry."

Her grip did not slacken. "And keeping the traitorous doppelgänger on the side?"

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"We're in Lowtown on your wedding day."

I sighed. She would not understand the shoe. I did not understand the shoe. But I had to offer some kind of sane explanation. Something better than the world pulling us together.

"I need to say goodbye and return something of hers." I swallowed. "I need her to promise to be safe."

Her hand loosened as she met my eyes. "You love her."

It was not a question. I nodded anyway, too tired to deny it.

"And you offer her nothing. Let her go."

She released me and I wondered how much to tell her.

"She's risking her life. I need to make her leave Tal behind and live her life."

Koshka set off again, this time leading the way and the crowds split when it was clear she would rather crash into someone than step aside. It seemed I had said something right.

I might not know my city as well as Alexei had, and was far from Vanya's familiarity, but I knew enough to be surprised at the fine townhouse in the middle of Lowtown.

"This is where she lives?" I had imagined a shady moneylender, a king of thieves who sent women to seduce the rich and powerful. This was the pride of an otherwise bleak street.

"You gonna ring the bell?" Koshka asked and turned to stare down those gathered in the nearby alley.

She was right to be cautious. If someone came close enough to see my distinctive eyes and arrived at the incredible conclusion that the king stood in Lowtown with only one guard, they would complete the stoning they'd started when I lay barely conscious only two blocks from here.

I lifted my hand and swallowed my reluctance. I was not here to argue. Only for goodbye and asking forgiveness for presuming she did not care. She had saved my life too many times for that.

The bell had barely sounded when a fair-haired woman in a fine lilac dress and sparkling avian mask opened the door, clearly on her way out.

Her eyes widened, before narrowing on me.

"What do you want?" Her voice was vaguely familiar, though I could not imagine where we had met. I searched behind her

for Tempest's familiar form.

"I'm here for Vanya."

She closed the door behind her. "Of course, you are. I didn't expect you came to see me. Not that anyone should come after first tearing my home apart and then leaving her in my care."

"Who are you?"

"Her sister. The one who told you her name after you found me tied up on the floor. I'm still waiting for a 'thank you.'"

I wracked my mind, finally remembering the cursed maid tied to the bed. At least that explained the mask. "And that's how you talk to your king?"

"I watched you stumble of your own tongue while undressing my stepsister with your eyes every time she was not looking. I'll speak as I want. You're the one on my doorstep."

I could not deny that. "You were not really a lady's maid, were you?"

"Not a role I would ever volunteer for." The woman expertly locked the door behind her back. "She's not here. Come back later. Or, even better, do not."

I was now blocking her path and from her exasperated huff, she wanted nothing more than for the king to leave her step. My hand closed around the shoe, feeling sillier by the moment. But I had come this far and was not returning with it.

"This is hers… I think she might want it." I held it out like the paltriest of offerings, the scuffed leather and broken string looking even worse in daylight.

"A single shoe." It was something between a question and a statement. I could not fault her.

"I believe she has the other. She said it belonged to her sister…"

We both stared at it.

"It's mine," the covered woman snapped and snatched it away before I could protest.

"Yours?"

"You said her sister, right? Well, I'm the only sister it fits now. Thank you for returning it, but there was no need to come all the way here."

Her tone clearly said, *Don't do it again.*

A white Temple coach had halted behind me, the horses snorting in impatience.

At a loss of what else to do, I stepped to the side and let her pass.

"If you care for her, don't let her do anything rash," I called.

The stepsister laughed behind the mask covering her face.

"When does she ever do anything else? I suggest you worry more about yourself and what it says that you came all the way here with a shoe and flimsy excuse instead of staying with your bride and servants. My stepsister, for all her faults, appreciates actions over words."

The coach door slammed shut, the horses moving before I could find an answer.

It was not like she was wrong.

The sun was already past midday. I had a wedding to attend, and I would much rather have stayed in this empty house, waiting for a woman who no longer wanted me.

"Enough closure?" Koshka said, her eyes seeing too much.

"Enough to know it's not over. No matter what happens tonight, I'll return to talk to her tomorrow. Without an excuse."

She only nodded.

Who married while worrying how to declare his love for another? For love was the only thing that would have brought me to this street today and I was too selfish to let it go.

For months, I had been telling myself I first only spent time with her to further my plans, then for information, and joy in the moment. I had never told Vanya how she had brought me back to life. I would tell her about Dasha and explain my reasons. But not on the street to win a fight. In private when we could take our time.

I needed to talk to Helia. While I had not promised fidelity, I would not hide my plans. We were allies and there would be no lies. It seemed I was bearing my heart to a woman tonight after all.

Vanya

Celebrants danced to the drums under the bone trees, unknowing of the danger that would rise with the setting of the sun. For the first time I could remember, my feet did not move with theirs.

Pilgrims dressed in death-white wound between the trees holding hands and singing. In other parts of the city, people were readying for protests and battles. But here, the Day of the Dead meant games and fun, food and joy in honor of the ancestors before the harvest and preparations for winter started. This year, it meant a royal wedding.

Last night had been a flurry of activity, and I had barely slept since I decided to act, no matter what happened, to hope and leap into the unknown.

To my surprise, I had found a box of sigil-covered stones at the back door this morning. I had a good idea who my friendly sigil crafter could be, but if Popova did not want to claim her charity, I would not question it.

They reminded me of the ones on the palace walls I had passed every time I walked through its courtyard. Lumi confirmed what they did, as when I brought the box into the house, she struggled to follow.

Since arriving at the Bone Grove bells ago, I had pressed the stones into as many hands as I could. Some would resell them, but a few had listened to my warnings.

No one here knew anything of mixed-up brides or what I had done to save their—hated or loved—king. My hand squeezed around the sack of remaining stones. No lorist would ever tell our tale.

Despite the celebratory mood, the bloody skeleton was everywhere. An additional tension vibrated through the air. Whispers the Death Goddess would return to right old wrongs.

This night brought change.

I caught a sleeve to claim the attention of the dancers.

I pressed a sigil stone into the woman's hand. "Stay inside tonight. Don't eat what's offered." Her annoyance slipped through our connection. She would not listen.

I repeated the action until afternoon became twilight, and instead of the thousands of Spirits they expected only one appeared. Lumi illuminated the night, her features clear and solid. At no other time were the dead as strong as the Day of the Dead.

The drums faltered. The dancers stopped.

Awe and fear and belief soared like griffons.

One whisper was on everyone's lips. "*Goddess."*

Lumi's left hand closed over mine, the right held a woman I had tried to convince.

"Listen," my sister said. "Blood will run tonight. Don't make it yours. Stay indoors. The Spirits do not celebrate this year. Some told you the Goddess wants you to attack the palace. They lied."

The words were repeated through the chains of dancers and magic swelled with their devotion.

They would listen to Lumi, and perhaps some would hear their story and follow. If only she had time to speak to all of Tal.

The sharp mind I recognized as Popova approached. She would be bringing her volunteers, then set off to join Morovara's priestesses outside the palace. The wedding party would have started with the setting sun. There was no more time.

"Spread the word," I said anyway. "The dead who walk tonight are not your friends."

I had done everything I could through mundane means. Once, I had communicated directly with hundreds of minds, almost killing myself. But it was time to stop holding back. Time to believe in myself and magic.

I leaned closer to Lumi.

"If I'm flagging, pull me back."

Popova stepped up to the edge of the crowd, seemingly dissatisfied with the attention we were gathering. Before either she

or my sister could argue, I broke down the mental wall Morovara had instructed me to build. I would not let all the people celebrating tonight die like my mother had, victims in another's war.

I closed my eyes.

Ask and listen, my great-grandmother had said.

The world around me vibrated with bright emotions. Each street in Rivertown was packed. The barges overflowing—open to all thanks to Nataliya and Lana, who were both there still. In Midtown, the night market's coins clinkered. North's Place was unusually quiet, the nobles celebrating in the palace, but people were gathering in Gateways, lured there by the rumor of hidden food.

Beyond them, an ancient cold gathered on Palace Road. Lumi's magic responded to it.

The dead were approaching.

The celebrants around me waited for their ancestors' Spirits to rise, unknowing their own would be the ones walking the streets too soon.

Joy and anger blended as my mind screamed that there were too many people. It could not encompass them all.

I don't want to change or shape, force or move. Only help them listen, I whispered to the world. Somewhere, a drum still beat.

I tapped my finger. Moved my foot.

Magic could not be forced, only allowed to flow.

The people watched as I danced to the sounds of our city. To the *click-click-click* of bones. To wind chimes and bat calls. To the hawkers' shouts and pilgrims' prayers.

The pure laughter of children as the first soaring lanterns were released, the lovers' embraces, hot and tender. The angry grumblings became a deep undertone because I would not pretend Tal was all light. Especially not tonight.

In Rivertown, whores called to customers; in Lowtown, beggars and thieves readied themselves for their best night of the year; in Midtown, the sound of dice mixed with tables waiting to be filled and the longing of all those seeing the wares they could not afford. In the Temple District the priestesses too young to help welcomed our ancestors, pretending this Day of the Dead was no different from any other.

Someone moved next to me, then the dancers resumed their sways and spins as I shared the melody of Tal.

Without halting my movements, I brought the cries and pain to the forefront. Shared my own death and the cold that came after, because nothing is more Talian than death itself.

Leave the Midtown festival. Go to Rivertown's barges. Stay indoors. Don't eat the food from the palace. Don't trust the dead or you'll join them. Hide!

The last word was torn from my throat as frigid arms embraced me and we fell together, tears and sweat mixing on my face.

"I'm sorry you faced that alone," Lumi said.

"I didn't. You were there."

I squeezed her back with trembling muscles.

Too-pale faces and wide eyes faced us, many frozen in the dance I had led.

Unflinchingly, Lumi met their stares. "Did you not hear my sister? *Hide!*"

And they did. People streamed out of the Grove and onto the streets, hopefully not slowing until they reached homes and barges.

When I had recovered enough strength to stand on my own, only Popova and three men stood between the pale trees.

"It seems you've reached the point where no one can refuse you. You better charge well for your services when this is over, girl. If you don't become powerful in your own right, you'll be another's weapon. I once offered your mother to marry you both to my grandsons. They're all taken now but let me know and I'll make one available again."

I blinked in confusion. "Marry?"

Popova made a dismissive gesture as if it was nothing, though a marriage offer from the foremost matchmaker in Lowtown would once have been more than I could wish for. But tonight, only one wedding mattered.

"Orso, I did not expect to see you here," Lumi said, redirecting my attention to the middle-aged man at Popova's side.

"So, this is the pretty sister," he said before turning a wide smile at Lumi. "You always said I would only meet her over your dead body."

"I should have said over yours." My sister radiated amusement and trust I would not have believed her capable of.

"How will you help us get into the palace?" I asked.

"Orso"—Lumi smiled at the man—"was one of the best safe builders in the city until a noble woman accused him of stealing. There wasn't any proof, so they let him go but he lost his shop. He's the one who taught me how to pick locks."

"I heard enough of the plan to figure you could use someone of my skills to tease open a door or two." He radiated iron-hard determination despite the casual tone. "From what I just heard in my head, tonight is the time to step up. Or were you just tugging at my heartstrings?"

My own lips twitched. I understood why my sister liked him.

"And you?" I asked the other two.

The rightmost one, a classically handsome, middle-aged bearded man dressed as well as any lord, kissed Popova on the cheek before offering me a polite bow.

"At your service, for tonight or any other."

"What?"

"This is my first husband. He goes by Pyre now I hear." Her disdain came clear and thick. "I would not trust him with anyone's virtue, but he loves Tal. Not too long ago that boy king of yours judged a trial in place of his father, the accused was a man who should have known to hold his tongue—Fyodor was ever such an incautious son. If anyone else had been there that day, our son would have hanged—and longer than you did. Pyre and I might not agree on much, but this we do. We'll help your king, for even if he doesn't know it, we owe him a personal debt."

Pyre twisted his hand in the air and flames enveloped it. Popova had brought a fire bearer.

"If you don't take her up on the marriage proposal, let me know." He winked.

"What's the sudden interest in my marriage status?" I said, while turning over what they had told me about Dimitri.

Popova smiled sadly. "That's power, my dear. It attracts likes. Live long enough and you'll see what being a heart turner means. You don't have to stay hidden like your sister."

"And you?" I asked the last, lanky, bespectacled man my own age.

"Maksim. One of her grandsons and a sigil crafter. I understood there might be some to interpret. I've studied a few obscure ones. The family thought I might be of use." He shrugged as if claiming a magic forbidden to anyone outside the Guild was of little import.

I had not been sure what Popova might bring, but each of these men's skills exceeded my expectations. Seemed my sister's demand and Dimitri's actions had provided us with a team of mages and thieves.

"There can't be many in Tal with your expertise." I did not hide my gratitude as I met their eyes. When I came to Popova, she flashed her gilded teeth.

"I collect the unusual and valuable our rules try to crush," she said with pride. "For all that Morovara and I don't see eye to eye, I believe the time has come to show we're not the helpless commoners they take us for. You should know what your own city hides, girl, when you talk again to our king."

"I won't—"

Pyre shook his head. "No point in arguing. She's always right. One of the reasons I could not stay married to her. Need a win once in a while. Speaking of, should we be on our way?"

Full dark had settled, Spirits should have fully risen, and the palace party should be in full swing. I nodded. Time to make our appearance.

"Girl," Popova called after me. "When you see the boy again, tell him I have something of his. If he pays well enough, I might even return it."

There was no time to question her words or repeat that I was unlikely to have a chance to deliver her message. And even if I could, I was not getting between her and the king of Tal.

Lumi watched as I changed behind a bush into a dress. Then three rebels and two girls, one alive and one dead, strode through abandoned streets dressed for what should have been a night of celebration. If spotted inside the palace, we wanted to be mistaken for guests, not thieves. Again, I wore one of Lana's finest dresses—which she had handed over without a word, the gold fabric twirling around my legs.

Doors creaked open and curtains lifted as we passed. I let Lumi lead our way and prayed to the Goddess she was the only Spirit to walk these streets tonight.

The people with blades strapped to their sides and metal canes in their hands discreetly nodded in our direction and raised their hands as if asking for my dead sister's blessing as we passed. Rebels ready for when Ealhswip and the undead approached the palace. Perhaps volunteers like Pyre and Maksim. The ones who had accepted Lumi's pamphlets and were willing to fight for a better Tal. This was not the battle they'd anticipated, but I knew in my bones that if we lost tonight, there would be no future ones.

Between them, I spotted white-dressed women—Morovara's people taking their ancient war out of the shadows.

The rebels had only been asked to slow the undead while the priestesses they protected freed the Spirits. And if they saw anyone living on Ealhswip's side, kill them. That was the plan we made in the predawn dark, but seeing the crowd thicken as we got higher up Palace Road—feeling the rising chords of discontent—I worried the disgruntled masses would turn violent when the first blows landed and the bloodbath that would come. There was little to tell disgruntled commoners apart from those in on Ealhswip's plot.

There was also nothing else that could be done, so women older and wiser than me had said. This was not a game of King's Conquest, but the roll of a die.

Walking, I shared the melody of peace and kindness with those around me. Perhaps it would make a difference. It was too late to do anything more than hope.

Lumi dissolved, though her hand remained in mine, allowing us to pretend to be revelers or discontents like any other. All the unknowns spun inside me.

We did not know how many undead had been raised.

Or when they would come.

Or what protections Dimitri had put into place—if any after mocking my words.

At the end of Palace Road, coaches and lamps lined the street. The palace gates stood open and uniformed guards checked each person who entered.

The festival air filled the night, cheers and music flowing out from the gardens as I recognized the towering shape blocking the road. Hope flared. Koshka had been in the prison, come for my death and resurrection, could Yahontov also have survived?

He would let us inside for surely Dimitri had told him I was still alive. Perhaps he had been in charge of searching the tunnels. Getting inside the palace would be easier than I could have anticipated.

I raised my hand in greeting, already speeding my steps, when my sister's insubstantial hand turned to ice in mine.

"They're dead and hers," she said. "See."

And as if her words opened my eyes, I noticed the guards' jerky movements when they patrolled the wall. Yahontov standing unnaturally still in the gate. The broken notes in the music of Tal. My blood turned as cold as my sister's magic as I realized he had not made it out alive.

Dimitri had complained more than once of city patrols going missing. He had accused the rebels and I had only questioned what Ealhswip needed the Spirits for, neither guessing the bodies might be as important.

No one realized the dead already walked among them. *And why would they?* In the tunnels, the undead had worn rags, their flesh rotting. Were those early attempts? Or did it not matter what the manual labor looked like? Why had I thought those were the best Ealhswip could do?

I'd seen a sliver of her power and assumed I understood.

Grabbing Maksim with my other hand, I pulled us behind an empty coach, and whispered, "We're too late. The gates are blocked."

Pyre bent around the carriage. "They look open to me."

"That's because corpses guard them," Lumi said, appearing next to him.

He jumped before smoothing his hair. Never would we have attempted a heist with a completely new crew, as afraid of each other as the target.

Maksim, quiet and calm, adjusted his glasses, then climbed the coach as well to study the wall.

"The Guild has been repairing the palace sigils for months. They should be pristine, not crackling." He swung down, facing our crumbling faces. "Some remain. I don't think the Spirits can go inside yet."

"So, there's still time," I said.

"Not much." Maksim shook his head, shoulder-length hair dancing. "It's incredible they've lasted this long. Something patched is not like new. And it's not like we can get inside this way either."

"I could burn them," Pyre offered, flames dancing over his knuckles.

"And have us arrested or killed before we cleared the courtyard?" I shook my head. "There are living guards somewhere, ready for an uprising."

There must be a way inside. A gate the guards were not watching. Somewhere hidden and forgotten…

"This way," I said, already rushing along the western wall.

The others followed, demanding an explanation.

"Is this your usual idiocy?" Lumi said in my mind, but there was a lightness to her voice.

I've missed you, I thought, while answering, "I'm improvising," out loud. Like I had been from the start.

I always thought best on my feet. Movement was freeing, the pent-up stress melting as I ran.

Behind us, shouts rose in protest, and I knew they soon would turn to fear. Anger flared. Drums pounded inside me. The last summer heat wrapped around us, refusing to let go. The city was finally boiling over.

By the time we cleared upper Midtown, the Archive and our old home all swishing by, the others had given up on their questions. I sprinted in the gold dress, praying to the Wishmaker and Goddess, we would not be too late. One bell until midnight.

I was running back in time.

We retraced my steps the day of the fire. I was back at the first time I escaped the palace, rushing to ensure Lumi had made it. Back to being a thief, ready for a job.

But this time, I was not alone. Not going to steal. Not coerced.

My feet remembered the street. I did not know its name, but I knew I was where I needed to be. This was the path Ealhswip had set me on, and like all curses, it contained its own destruction.

Breaking open the door and ignoring the people's shouts inside, I started up the stairs while gulping in enough air to explain.

"There's a rope hanging from an unbreakable hook on the palace wall. It reaches the roof."

There would be no tree to climb down on the other side of the wall, but we would figure it out.

Two floors left.

Orso puffed beside me as we broke out onto the roof.

I barely recognized it. During the fire, the sky had been gray, the place desolate. Tonight, paper lanterns in the colors of the rainbow and rose garlands greeted us. As did twenty or so festive people.

We stared at each other.

In our party finery, we were dressed for the palace, not a Lowtown celebration. At least we did not look like thieves or robbers.

"I'm sorry," I stammered. "We'll be gone soon."

Frantically, I searched the dark for the rope. Had they removed it?

"You're the voice," a woman my age said. "The one in my head."

"This is a private party," a man said, as he wrapped her protectively in his arms, others grumbling in agreement. "We know nothing."

"Have you seen a rope?" I got only deserved blank looks in return.

My mind, stretched to know what was happening in the palace, struggled to form the necessary lies.

Pyre stepped forward, spreading his arms as if greeting friends. "The girl left a rope hanging here a month ago. Don't be scared now. We just need a little light."

When the blue mage light appeared at his side, Lumi lifted my arm so that we pointed together. Perhaps her Spirit eyes saw better in the night than daylight. I knew she only intended to direct my attention, but our magic ran wild—the wall inside me broken, her archive unraveling—and she appeared at my side.

The man fell to his knees, dragging the woman with him. Their friends and family followed, all speaking over each other.

"Goddess, spare us."

"It's her."

"It was real."

"I felt her die."

"*They're one.*"

"One."

The words rang out over the city as a fire rose in the distance, and inside me, a chorus screamed.

The fire was not the wild thing of a month ago. We had planned for it, as much as anyone could in one day. If the mob broke through the guards at the food warehouse, Popova's people would torch it. Hopefully, it was the lesser evil, but the memories of smoke and terror were too close for many and the fear covered Tal like a miasma of insanity.

Through Lumi, I knew new Spirits rose in Gateways. People were dying. Instead of grieving, I hoped Ealhswip would not get to them before Morovara steered them to the temples. Later, I would mourn. *Please, Goddess, let there be a later*.

A cold grip squeezed my wrist.

I blinked back to the roof.

People were on their knees before us. Popova's people seemed equally unsure what to do.

Lumi still held my arm raised. I followed its path.

One of the strings holding the lanterns up continued into the dark all the way to the wall. *My rope.*

Lana had supplied it for breaking into the king's chambers. I knew my stepsister always chose good quality.

"We're going up. Do you have more rope we could borrow?" I asked. Might as well make use of their amenability. We could tie them together to get down on the other side. And you could never have too many ropes.

While some helped Maksim and Orso remove the lanterns, others brought every string they could find.

Lumi and I gave up on helping when for the third time someone threw themselves to the ground as we approached. It was fast and still too long before I climbed the wall, two laundry lines tied around me, golden dress hiked up and using a tilted table as stepping stool to reach the rope. At least I still wore trousers underneath.

No breeze disturbed the summer night, the heat pressing down. I wished for gloves the third time my sweaty grip slipped an inch.

When I reached the top edge and heaved myself on top of the wall, my hair stuck to my forehead and arms shook. I had not climbed much the entire summer. Life under Kirill had been hard, but it had kept me in shape. I was flagging before we even reached the Women's Tower.

While I unwound the laundry lines and tied them together, Maksim, surprisingly nimble, scaled the wall.

Orso came next, cursing twice for each inch climbed. As a safecracker this was most likely not his first wall, though probably the highest despite starting from the roof below.

Pyre slid twice before he made it.

Before the fire bearer was fully over the edge, I was connecting the ropes and throwing them over the other side.

I wanted nothing more than to leap after them, damn my hurting hands. But there were times to hurry slowly, as our mother

said. I would not throw away our advantage by breaking my neck on the way down.

Hand by hand, testing each foothold and daring a mage light to help, I used every instinct and skill I'd gained robbing nobles, and made it onto the broken branch, leaves now dead.

Maksim followed, losing his footing halfway and landing with a crash. Crawling out of the foliage, he complained of nothing more than bruises.

Orso came so slowly I wanted to scream at him the world was not waiting.

I allowed my mind to drift. People fought in the city. Spirits—new and old—rose. The dead walked on to the palace. I could feel it all. Not the details, but the song of Tal changing into cacophony.

Pyre, perhaps as impatient as I or in a display of the famous fire bearer temper, started his descent when Orso was halfway.

The rope swung against the ledge.

Once. Twice. Orso was only six feet above the ground. Pyre halfway.

Metal I had been promised was unbreakable snapped under their combined weight and month-long exposure, and a figure encased in flame fell like a comet into the dry brush.

There was a reason fire bearers were known as explosions, Mariska had told me while trying to teach me to steer my magic. When their power got away from them, their mind did not fill with the emotions and thoughts of others; they did not draw inward like my power and water seers did. Elementals pushed outward, consuming everything in their way.

It had not rained for more than a three-day.

The summer heat, which had seemed oppressive before, became a second thought as fire leaped with heat like a furnace.

Orso was inside the bonfire. I could not hear his screams above the woosh of the flames as they consumed the dead branch.

Cold hands tried to pull me back, less substantial in the face of the fire.

Then human ones wrapped around me, and Maksim hauled me back.

Fire burned in the city. Fire burned in the palace forest. Had my interfering already brought more damage than Ealhswip's plot? Even if she would hurt no other, would be a wonderful ruler, I would have come for the man who hung me.

For him, I had set Tal on fire.

Death tore through the music. Spirits and something darker called Lumi.

Maksim shouted.

A dark figure rose inside the flames. It resolved into two, one leaning on the other.

As they came closer, the fire drew inward instead of spreading. The darkness returned, absolute after the brightness, and smoke filled my senses.

My magic was stretched so far my vision started to warp; a laugh climbed up my throat.

"I tried to tell you they'd be fine," Maksim said in the silence. "Pyre isn't some untrained hack."

"Watch that tone, son," came the pain-filled answer. "Damned heights, never liked them."

Listening to them bicker, I rebuilt my internal wall stone by stone. I could not afford the distraction of what was happening in the city. I had almost burned, unable to move away.

The effects of the magic were not as obvious as before I broke Popova's curse, but this call was no less insidious.

Slowly, I returned, the world muted.

Mage lights and Lumi illuminated the woods.

Pyre had only twisted his leg when landing and was already preparing a splint.

Orso insisted he was fine despite his scorched clothes. No way to pass for party guests. Not that my fine dress would fare well traipsing through the dark forest. We would have to stay to the shadows.

A bell rang. *Midnight*.

We were too late.

Was he already dead?

Had this been for nothing?

Unable to do anything else, we set off toward the palace, leaving Pyre to make his own, slower way.

The hope inside me refused to die.

This was the forest where Dimitri caught me. This time, I was the one hunting, and no one else, even ancient undead queens, would derail me.

Even if he married another, I would fight for his life.

Morovara's words—*wear the crown, restore the balance*—spurred me on. There was a way to beat Ealhswip. She did not have the real crown. She did not know I was coming for her.

Dimitri

My father's old manservant barely stopped short of grabbing me when I arrived at the royal chambers. He supervised the army of servants washing and dressing me, mumbling how I would not disappear again. My hope to talk to Helia before the party evaporated, for she would surely be in a similar situation inside the Women's Tower, and even a king would struggle to battle his way through all the ladies of court preparing for the party of the season.

We still had time, I told myself, for the sun was only just setting.

When I left the chambers a frantic bell later, two servants—probably my third cousins or similar—followed behind, carrying the royal crowns. I had retrieved one from the treasury the previous day, the other from my closet, deciding to trust Vanya. Magic might have warped her mind—it was the only explanation I could think of, and not unusual even with well-trained mages. Tomorrow, I would ask Mariska to visit her and judge the damage. It did not matter, I loved her in any state.

Love.

It was as if seeing Dasha opened my heart, frozen emotions flowing again. I loved Mariska, Alexei, and Eki as friends and family. I loved Vanya Komarova, even when she hated me, even when I had to walk away.

In the great hall, candelabras and standing tables lined the walls, ladened with food and drink. Red, blue, and purple flower garlands hung from the high ceiling. My guests—anyone in Tal rich or noble enough to warrant an invitation according to von Uster—drank and laughed, dressed in white to honor the dead. Only Helia and I wore red for fertility and luck.

Nothing felt right about the elaborate, embroidered coat and ostentatious, gilded ceremonial sword at my side.

The nobles bowed and curtsied as I passed on my way to the dais, and the only two seats in the hall. All eyes would be on my bride and I until we retired at midnight for the ceremony in the crypt. Three bells until I sealed my fate.

The crowns were placed on the black stone table. How I wished a thief would come again to steal them away. The pain in my chest caught my breath when my bride entered. Her long red dress, cut low enough to showcase her shoulders and collarbone, swished across the floor with each step. At this distance, my mind thought it was *her*, they were so alike. Memories of the single perfect day Tempest and I had returned with force. My breath locked in my chest. Only twice we had shed our clothes, and still, her whole body was mapped in my mind. The curves and dips, the birthmarks like stars to guide me true, the touch that made her moan.

Then Helia stepped closer, the illusion broke, and I cursed myself. If Tempest did show up here, I might have to kill her for real. It turned my stomach, for I knew I could not.

I would sacrifice the respect of all gathered before I hurt a hair on her head again.

Helia settled beside me, spreading her wide skirts, heavy with rubies.

"Terribly gaudy affair. When I was a child, I dreamt of visiting Tal during the Day of the Dead. This does not live up to years of childish imaginings."

She took me off guard again. Another thing she had in common with Vanya, though there was nothing teasing in Helia's tone. She did not say it to rile me. She stated the plain truth and did not care who heard.

"I apologize that it's not more to your liking. The city will be packed, foreigners and worshipers mixing and celebrating. Maybe that's more to your liking. Another year, when it's safe, you could attend the festival." I lowered my voice. "I need to speak to you about wedding vows and heirs."

She turned her astute eyes, giant behind the glasses, on me. "So, have you reconsidered marrying me? Am I about to be publicly rejected like the last princess?" I might have stuttered something incomprehensible as she continued. "Or is this when you declare your undying love and need for me to bear your children?"

"I already have a child," I whispered.

She blinked, mouth opening and closing, thoughts racing behind her large eyes.

"And you still hung her?" she finally demanded, voice too high.

"What? My daughter is alive."

"Her mother—my presumed cousin. The one you mistook for me."

My face heated, and feeling the numerous eyes on us, I tried to contain my retort.

"I would never kill a child. I recently found out I have a three-year-old daughter. I've already prepared the documents to claim her officially."

"Congratulations?" Helia raised an eyebrow, tapping her fingers on the table as salad leaves arranged into birds were settled before us.

"That complicates things," she continued when alone again. "No one would believe her mine. It also offers me a great excuse to leave after the wedding and you find a replacement bride. As long as you honor all the trade terms in the marriage contract." She narrowed her eyes.

"You'll still go through with the vows? And not object when I claim Dasha?"

She waved her hand dismissively and her glass levitated into it. "If I was going to back out it would have been before now."

The weight inside eased. But I had one more thing she needed to know…

"After the wedding, I'll tell Vanya that I want a future no matter what it looks like." After I solved the issue of her death sentence, of course.

"I understand your fascination with the Komovara sisters. I came here planning to avoid the marriage as I thought you would expect a meek woman to bear your children. Seems you have both other women and a child—all you need is my title. That, I'll happily give."

"And your magic." She needed to know more but even I only partly believed Solovyova's story. "The crown will tie you to Tal… and something might happen when we swear our vows."

A Spirit drifted in through the wall to my right, the glass crown reflecting its milky shine. I stared as the crowd cheered, believing it showed the approval of our ancestors, not knowing the sigils were still supposed to be working.

Five more light shapes joined the first one.

"Something is wrong."

I turned to Koshka who stood like a statue at the back wall. She, more than anyone else, knew what was at stake.

My look was enough to send her outside to investigate. She knew my orders. Knew the Spirits were not supposed to be here, had felt their touch on the bridge and fought the undead under the city.

Helia followed my gaze. "What—"

A noble man I did not recognize stopped before us, seemingly not noticing he was interrupting his soon-to-be queen.

"Congratulations, my king. We have all awaited this day a very long time."

I nodded in return to his polite words and hid my concerns behind a stiff smile.

"Thank you…" My eyes drifted back to the Spirits. There were already more.

"Lord von Mekeln." He bowed as my fist clenched.

Von Mekeln. Vanya had given me his name. I had told the spymaster to look into it, but there had been few people to spare in the last, frantic days. I could not arrest him, a connected lord, on her accusation alone. It was not like she could testify in court, dead as she was.

The man smiled at me, eyes flickering to the Spirits.

I pulled Helia to her feet, declaring, "It's time to head to the crypt and say our vows."

Von Mekeln frowned. "It's not midnight for another bell."

"Seems I cannot wait to make the princess my wife."

I was already backing away, pulling Helia along.

Koshka rushed through the door behind the dais, blood splattered over her white coat. Five bone soldiers in uniform followed. By the time the first shocked cries from the crowd echoed above the music, Helia and I were at their side.

"There's fighting in the streets. Rebels," Koshka said while the soldiers closed around us. The blood had drained from her face. Von Uster appeared as if out of thin air at my side. "The gates are open."

"How?" I snapped.

"The gate guards are walking dead. They must have killed the ones stationed there without anyone noticing. As soon as someone falls, they rise again. They damaged the gate sigils and the Spirits joined. A few mages still stand. Priestesses and civilians fight on both sides." Koshka stared back at the door. "Palace Road is soaked in blood."

I should have prepared us better. Investigated the missing guards. Pieces moved in my mind, and I realized how few I had left.

"Bar the doors, send archers and mages to the third floor, and shoot down anyone who tries to get inside. Find someone who can repair the outer sigils."

Surely, we had invited the Guild master to this farce of a wedding.

I marched out of the hall, needing to get to a balcony and see for myself. Everyone who could be spared had been sent to

protect the food stored in Gateways. Had their intention all along been to force me to reduce my guard? Or was this a happy coincidence?

Von Mekeln placed a cold hand on my arm as I reached the stairs. I had not even noticed him following.

"You cannot leave the Women's Tower undefended. If I may be so bold, take a force over there and complete the wedding ceremony, otherwise the world will soon know that you let a few miscreants stop your own marriage. That Tal is weak."

"That's His Majesty to you," Koshka said and slapped his hand away, uncaring for ceremony, then turned to me. "You are the king. For once stay where it is safe."

"You cannot let the poor rule you," von Mekeln said, raising his voice. We were drawing a crowd of confused nobles, including the newly selected councilors. "Surely there are enough men to protect the king while he crosses his own courtyard."

Even von Uster nodded.

I was going to be a strong king, not hidden away like my father. These men and women needed to respect me. I owed it to Dasha. Had promised Eki a future. Had vowed to talk to Vanya when all had settled.

"We go now."

Some cheered, but most stared blankly, unable to understand how quickly the night had turned. The musicians stopped playing. Shouts pierced the thick walls.

"Does anyone have the crowns?" I said, searching the white crowd around us and was met by shaking heads.

"Incoming," Helia called.

People jumped out of the way as the glass crowns of Tal flew through the air, only to hover before me and Helia.

She waved me onward. "Let's get this over with."

Koshka reluctantly led us to the back door facing the garden that hosted my failed engagement party three months earlier. Five soldiers, full bone armor rattling, surrounded us.

Together, we stepped out into the night.

I turned back to von Uster as he made to follow.

"If I do not return, send a rider to the chiefs outside the walls. Tell them what happened and ask for protection. There are signed papers in my chambers confirming the girl they took in yesterday is my heir. They should be happy a woman will rule Tal again."

Before he could answer, I led the others toward the lit windows of the Tower, a beacon in the night from which the divine ruler had once commanded Tal.

White Spirits illuminated the night and between them, unnaturally stiff shapes moved. The dead had arrived. The connection was not lost on me.

Ealhswip. We lived in a lorist's tale.

The resistance was already organizing. Arrows flew at commander's calls, the nobles who had once served in the Guard gathered fire and wind, fighting in their finery. Tal was old and bent but not broken.

In the stable, griffons screeched. I shouted for them to be let out. They could not fly in the dark—barely see—but we could not risk anyone torching the stable with them inside and even on the ground they were dangerous fighters. When we passed, Helia waved her arm, and the wide doors flew open, and irate griffons joined the chaos.

We reached the garden path, having run behind the defenders. Shame at not taking my place among them burned inside me, but something pulled me forward. They had chosen this night to attack. Perhaps to stop the wedding. If I fell out here, they would surely win.

I unlocked the gate to the Tower garden with the master key. I was breaking one of our most sacred laws allowing the male bone soldiers in. Another problem for when the dead themselves did not attack.

Lanterns hung from every tree. The thick walls blocked the noise.

Helia and I were supposed to come here after the ceremony to spend our first night together. Then I would leave, and she would move into the royal chambers on the highest floor of the Tower. The servants had done an outstanding job creating a magical hideaway. As we hurried through, I imagined entering it with another woman, and felt like the bastard I was. No one deserved her husband thinking such things on their wedding night, even if she did not have any more desire for me than I her.

We entered the Tower proper without pausing. Where there should have been celebrating women and children, silence reigned. The tables were set with food, flowers hung up on the walls, the musician's instruments stood ready. Only the people were missing.

"Check that the gate is unbroken, then find my grandmother and the others," I commanded the soldiers, struggling not to follow them, but what would one more fighter be able to do? And if I went with them, they would try to protect me instead of the women and children. "We are going to the crypt and will return in half a bell."

At least the ceremony was a fast one; a little blood, a ritual oath wearing the crowns, and a handfasting. Then—officially—I would be wed for the rest of my life to Helia von Heskin. Never had I been gladder to lie to the world.

I led the way, setting a punishing pace for me and Helia, knowing that if I gave myself time to think I would turn around. People I cared about were fighting in the night. If Solovyova's and Morovara's warnings were true, the ceremony needed to be

completed.

We threw ourselves down black steps, Helia's mage light shining the way.

Despite Vanya's warnings, the crypt remained as cold and empty as when my father's bones were prepared.

Helia, her breath coming in bursts, crashed into me before stopping. Without preamble, I grabbed the larger still floating crown and placed it on my head.

The magic shot through my veins.

Lightning burned my heart.

A flash of green crossed my eyes.

It settled faster than during the crowning. I had already claimed it.

"Your turn," I said to Helia, knowing that even without the vows, she would be bound to me and Tal the moment she wore the royal crown. "Last chance to back out."

Her fierce smile was all Vanya, transforming them into twins rather than distant cousins, as she placed the ancient glass crown on her head. How far would Tempest have let the ruse go? Would she, like Helia did, have placed the real crown on her head if I had not walked away when she revealed who she was? As the glass settled on Helia's curls, I wish I had stayed, rewarding her honesty with trust.

The crown would have fitted my Tempest like it could no one else. It had brought us together at the engagement ball. No matter how crazy, it should have bonded us at the wedding—if only it was to the right princess.

There was no visible sign of the magic taking hold of Helia. Perhaps the flash was only perceivable to the one wearing the crown.

For the blood, I drew my ceremonial sword halfway out of the sheath and ran my other palm lightly across the sharp edge, opening a long shallow cut.

Hurry, the wind whispered, and I felt something approaching despite the still air.

"Now your hand."

"I can do that myself." Helia pressed her palm against the blade until blood ran down her fingers, the stains invisible on her red dress. Too deep. She would need a healer to not scar.

Magic from the crown swirled through me, setting my teeth on edge. It was building to something.

Joining our hands, blood mixed, powers merged. Hers—a sparkling power in pink and purple—spread like an endless ocean. It swallowed my magic, nothing more than a shallow lake, until I vibrated. This was the reason my family insisted we marry, and feeling the difference in power I finally understood the potential she carried. I believed her displays of magic only a cultural difference, but they were needed to let off the pressure she must be feeling daily.

The oath came unbidden to my tongue, as if the magic and crowns demanded it.

"I swear to protect Tal, to ward against the darkness and give the dead peace. I swear that the Gate will remain closed until the day I die. I bind myself to you."

Helia's words echoed mine and jointly we placed our bloody hands on the sculpted sigils surrounding the Goddess's face.

A weight settled inside me; a regret I would carry for life, a hope for the city above.

The sigils glowed, pulling the built-up magic out and out until the crypt danced in colors.

Pain, like it was stealing part of me, lanced through my arm before it finally let go.

The Goddess moved, eyes shining like emeralds.

Somewhere a gear turned, and as when Vanya led us into the tunnels, the wall slid back, revealing stairs descending into the earth.

"What—"

Something flew past my ear, sparks flying as it hit the stone wall.

Helia cried out before falling.

I dropped to catch her—probably the only thing that saved me from a similar fate. Pulling her to the side, I turned to face the crypt entrance.

Von Lemerch, Lord von Mekeln, and five priestesses blocked the way to the world above. Helia, deadweight in my arms, moaned when I carefully placed her on the floor to free my hands.

Von Lemerch held her cane as if she had swung it and was about to do so again.

Blue flames burned in her eyes, consuming the whites. Von Mekeln's smile stretched unnaturally wide.

The temperature dropped, like during a mountain winter night.

Fear froze me.

I was back on the bridge. The same magic that I felt when the Spirits descended and I thought Vanya would die, brushed against my insides. The shadows stretched until the room dimmed, only the sigils still shining.

"Finally," von Lemerch said and rolled her neck. A sharp crack bounced around the too-quiet crypt. "Twenty-six years since the last royal wedding and then their magic was not enough to power the doorway. Before that, the crowns provided too much magic for me to break through. This time everything was managed. You, my king, have done excellently."

I backed away while drawing my sword. “Who are you?” I said, while knowing the answer. Vanya had spoken the impossible truth.

Ealhswip laughed.

“Bring them. There’s no knowing what sigils they’ve laid into the Gate over the centuries. We might need more royal blood.”

She strode straight for the tunnel at my back. Never before had I attacked an old woman, but she was no longer human.

I could not let her pass.

My sword, made for show but kept sharp, sank into her shoulder, cutting through sinew until it struck bone, almost separating her right arm from the body. She stumbled, grabbed the blade with both hands, and dislodged it. Blood spurted across the room as the flesh reknit before my eyes. Not even an expert healer would have been able to do the same. It was impossible.

She lifted her cane and only lifelong training made me roll to the side in time to avoid it. I lifted my blade again as von Mekeln moved around the sarcophagus to get to me. He smiled while the priestesses seemed anxious to continue.

One bent over Helia as von Mekeln rushed me, drawing his own blade. I danced to the side and slashed into his arm. It should have disabled it, but he wielded his sword as smoothly as if I had missed.

I ducked his lazy attacks while again landing my own—cloth and flesh split. Blood stained my blade. And von Mekeln only smiled.

Each blow I blocked nearly knocked my blade from my hands. I had sparred with Zakhar daily as a youth, then Yahontov over the summer, both significantly larger men than me, and still held my own. In the mountains, I dreamt of revenge as I trained alone and against hardened guards. Von Mekeln, who was decades their senior and portly, should have been an easy opponent. But nothing was as it should have been.

He flicked his blade, opening a cut along my side before I could twist away. I was slowing and there was not enough room to move.

Von Mekeln smiled as he strode forward. “I always wanted to make the Herebovs bleed. How fitting it would be here among the bones of your ancestors.”

He lunged and I jumped on top of the central stone basin, pushing myself higher by wrapping wind around me. It was easier than ever before. My curse had not failed because of my lack of magic, but because Dasha lived—*May those who hurt mine, be hurt in kind*, ineffectual on those thought responsible at the time. But the man who killed Alexei had died shortly after. Everyone else of mine was safe.

Wind danced around me, lending speed to my movements, strength to my blocks and hits. I leapt and felt like flying. But again and again, von Mekeln came, never tiring.

Landing behind him, I saw my opening, but what would a blade to the heart matter? I could not win this.

I backed up, giving myself time to look around.

The clang of our swords had filled my ears, but now I noticed two priestesses lifting Helia while another argued with the councilwoman that they had to continue while the power of the dead was at its highest.

Von Mekeln attacked again, and I jumped to the next sarcophagus, then the next. Blood ran down my arm. He chased after, forcing me to keep moving as I tried to find a solution.

I can’t hurt them. Could I at least inconvenience them?

Von Lemerch was unnatural. Von Mekeln invincible. But the priestesses seemed human.

I led von Mekeln away until I stood between him and the others, seemingly surrounded. I let my shoulders slump, blade tip sink. His steps slowed as he grinned in my direction, lowering his own blade as I had expected. He wanted a show, a chase.

With genuine fear painted across my face, I backed away. As predicted, he stopped to watch. We both knew there was nowhere for me to run.

I knew this crypt. Could map it in my mind and estimate the steps across. The air whispered each movement of those behind me as they spread out to catch me.

Counting each foot until only eight separated me from where I had started, I spun before the others moved and, barely avoiding Helia’s unconscious body, stabbed the closest priestess through the side.

Before I processed the scream and blood staining the white robe, I pulled out the sword to attack the next one. It was not the revenge I had dreamt of, not the battle I had trained for, but if my skills and life could give Dasha and Tempest a chance, they were the deaths I would claim.

I slashed the next one’s leg. Threw myself forward to keep moving, air speeding me along.

Von Mekeln crashed into the wall where I had just stood.

I sliced the closest priestess’s arm as the others swarmed me—too many, too strong. Twisting desperately, I stabbed Mekeln through the heart.

He smiled as he stepped closer anyway. Two of the remaining four priestesses tore my hands away.

Von Mekeln, still on my blade, punched my temple, and though I saw it coming and the last magic sang in my veins, I could not move fast enough to duck.

My head snapped to the side, the crown crashed to the floor, and the world went blissfully black.

Somehow, my second wedding ended even worse than the first. I must truly be cursed.

Vanya

Orso picked one of the back gates to the Women's Tower as the undead in the courtyard behind us were met with swords and torches. Spirits lit the palace grounds, swarming the main buildings, as men clashed blades and griffons attacked the undead with beaks and claws.

You can't fight this battle, I reminded myself. I was no warrior, and ahead was both Dimitri and Morovara's price for the priestesses fighting with the guards.

Lumi's light grew. "The sigils are fully down."

"Perfect," Orso said, his tone anything but.

It should have been obvious as Lumi had been brightening as we hurried through the woods and gardens, but we had still hoped the rebels had stopped them on Palace Road. I should have known better.

Orso waved us through the gate, into what should have been the safest place in Tal. Lumi passed this second line of sigils without issue, and I prayed to the Death Goddess for the children this place protected within its walls. They had nothing to do with this ancient struggle. Then again, neither did I.

Last time I ran through the Tower gardens, I had been high on magic and terror. This time, the fear was different, with tension like wires wrapped around my bone. We snuck through, slower now in case we encountered guards from either side of the battle outside. The natural beauty, hidden away and cultivated for the most privileged women in Tal, barely registered. Lanterns lit a path further in. I led us the other way, trying to remember the way I went last time. Somewhere was the entrance to the underground.

A tree seemed familiar. And a bench and fireflies.

Shouts of pain and bloodthirst sounded from the Tower's front entrance. That no one came to investigate filled me with equal fear and gratitude.

"It's close," I said, trying to see over the bushes.

We stood beyond the lanterns' light and no matter how I squinted into the dark, I could not spot the stone structure of the entrance to the tunnels under the Tower.

The plan had been to follow Dimitri and Helia as they passed, but midnight had already arrived and we were too late. I could only hope and dread who else was coming.

"We wait until they break through the fighting and come with the dead."

I expected my companions—all older and more experienced—to argue; instead, they nodded and we sank further into the dark undergrowth.

Maksim sidled closer to me. "You know the new king, right? Will you be able to reason with him?"

Maybe if Lumi had not tried to kill him, if his last words to me had not been to leave Tal and its problems to him. He might think me a silly girl interrupting his wedding. "Maybe once…"

The sound of approaching steps saved me from explaining more.

I grabbed Maksim's arm, pulling us to the ground.

The night grew colder as the *thump-thump-thump* of something striking the stone path approached. I filled each crack in my mental walls, unwilling to touch her and worried she might feel it.

Five priestesses with floating mage lights spearheaded the group. In the middle walked Ealhswip, her cane providing the marching beat. She seemed larger, movements smoother, the hits of the cane displaying a strength belying her age and humanity. Like one of the great cats said to roam the mountains or a griffon, she had no natural enemies, and knew it.

A noble man protected the rear. He passed under a lantern, and I could not stop my sudden inhale.

The last time I saw him, Lumi and I tried to rob his wife and then escaped through the window. I still did not know if he had

been there to judge our skills, appearance, or had been supposed to catch us after we killed his wife and exclude Kirill from the deal by blackmailing us. At least I had guessed right when giving Dimitri his name. Not that it seemed to have mattered.

We lay flat as the procession passed. They were clearly not worried about being seen and fortunately, in too much of a hurry to study their surroundings.

Did that mean Dimitri had gone before us? Or was he delayed and they were getting into position? Had Ealhswip decided to kill him before he reached the crypt and married?

Each possibility raised my pulse, its pounding loud in my ears, until I almost missed their words.

One of the priestesses had removed vines, revealing a stone door—my previous exit and our entrance.

Ealhswip pushed her to the side, demanding simultaneously, "What's the delay?"

"It's locked somehow," the priestess answered, bowing her head.

Von Mekeln stepped up. "First the Spirits don't wait—I understand their impatience—and now our king's spooked. You should be glad I could convince him to marry at all."

"They already knew… They burned the warehouse before we had enough Spirits to power all the bodies and fight on more than one front," the priestess said. "We needed to get inside and the sigils were down." She turned to Ealhswip. "You would have been blocked from your birthright, mistress."

Ealhswip waved her hand dismissively. "We've lost the advantage of surprise already. Break it down."

The last was said to von Mekeln.

With a roar, he threw himself against a door I could not see, and I knew for sure we were alone. There was no way the Tower's inhabitants would not have heard the crash in the unnaturally silent garden. Were all the noble women and children lying dead inside the Tower? Fed poison to help this woman release the dead on Tal in some twisted revenge on people long dead?

As Helia, I had walked inside the ancient building, marveling at the mosaics of each floor. How many people had I passed? Servants and female guards. Ladies and sons and daughters. I remembered the little girl hiding while studying me. Did she still breathe? How could anything justify this?

Von Mekeln threw himself forward again and with a resounding creak, the stone door—which had stood the test of time and should have required a battering ram to budge—gave way. As they and their mage lights entered, the night seemed darker than before.

Rebels and priestesses and living guards fought outside and in the city. People battled to gorge themselves on poisoned food. The dead themselves, an endless mist suffocating Tal for so long that we no longer noticed, deserved the rest the Goddess promised.

Morovara had claimed me as her great-granddaughter. I had a job to do.

On silent feet, I felt my way to the broken door. Only the twinkling of the lights far down the steps interrupted the absolute darkness. I remembered running up and up through the earth. Time to return.

My companions joined me, Lumi softly illuminating the night, and we descended, torn between stealth and the urgent need to know what was happening below.

Down.

Down.

Down.

A woman's cry echoed in the dark, breaking the monotony and my restraint.

I flew down the steps, breath hard in my ears.

We were not too late.

Let him live.

Mage lights erupted around me, zipping like wasps. Steps pounded behind.

Someone cried a warning.

I burst into the crypt at the bottom. They should have seen me coming. Heard the commotion. I had broken every rule a thief lived by. For once, it did not matter because only blood-stained stone and an open doorway into the earth greeted me.

Someone pushed me further into the room. I scanned the sarcophagi. Only the chiseled eyes of the long dead met mine. No bodies.

Something caught the light, splintering it into a rainbow of colors.

Two crowns lay on the ground, the smaller one covered in a spiderweb of cracks.

I touched it, cutting my finger on the sharp shards, and a warm spark lit inside me only to wink out together with any hope that this was the fake crown she'd broken. Ealhswip must have been in too much of a hurry to notice. I could only hope it would help.

"Are those…" Orso did not complete the question. There was no need for all knew stories of the Talian glass crowns.

Maksim reverently lifted each, studying the sigils as he sat them on the nearest stone coffin.

My head snapped around as steps approached from above. *Had Ealhswip brought more supporters?*

Lumi moved between me and the stairs. Her cold magic gathered. I focused inward, breaking my wall, and prepared to command others again. No matter what Morovara had said, I would make exceptions to bending those who tried to outright kill me. Kindness only stretched so far.

Three men and one woman burst into the crypt with drawn swords. Blue swirled around Lumi, green around the other woman's red boots.

"Stop," I shouted, throwing myself forward.

She had hung me and been there when I came back to life. Koshka looked likely to kill me a second time as her eyes narrowed.

"*You*. I should have known. What have you done to him?"

Lumi's ethereal flames shrank until they danced around her hands. "You know these *guards?*" She made it sound synonymous with dung.

"They're bone soldiers. Or at least she is."

I pointed to Koshka who strode forward, zeroing in on the blood and ignoring the rest of us. Only when her eyes shifted to Lumi did I detect fear.

"The King and Princess von Heskin were supposed to have returned by now."

"And where were you?" I demanded, anger growing. "You're his guards."

"You left him to die," Koshka exclaimed, marching on me despite Lumi's angry presence. "I had to watch them kill my friend after your magic made us run straight into an ambush in the tunnels. Now I had to fight his undead body. His bones and Spirit deserved so much better. Do you even think of him?"

Shame stained my cheeks. I had seen Yahontov at the gate but only felt fear. She was right—I had forgotten them too fast. My only excuse was that none had even told me of his death. There had been too much else…

"Did you…" *Kill him? Again?*

Koshka looked like she wanted to stab me. The blond man next to her sheathed his sword and put a hand on her arm.

"We organized the nobles before following to the Tower," he said and nodded to their other companions. "Then gave the dead guards outside the Tower peace. I'm Kaz. I saw you during the trial. You're the one he planned to marry."

"No one ever planned to marry *me*." I pushed my confused frustration away. "They were gone when we entered. Probably went down there."

I pointed at the doorway, and dark path beyond, feeling the cold draft like an inhale. Something waited below.

"Who attacked him?" Koshka said without a trace of the easygoing woman I first met. "Talk."

"Ealhswip—von Lemerch," I spit out. "Don't ask. She had disloyal priestesses with her. And von Mekeln."

One of the men gave me a strange look before shrugging. Guess we had more pressing worries than a strange girl.

Kaz stared down the stairs. "Usually you don't take corpses with you so they're probably alive, but who can tell tonight?"

"The King is down there, so that's where we go," Koshka agreed.

Below, a song played, summoning me—it was Tal and not Tal. A mirror of what it could have been. What it once was. Independent. Holy. Dark.

No one else seemed to hear it.

Lumi met my eyes, and I felt the pull inside her. Something was happening.

I longed to rush down, throw myself into danger, and let it blanket my mind until there was only reacting. Before I died, it was what made me feel alive. That edge.

The pull grew, like a maw wanting to swallow me whole.

But others relied on me tonight.

I had asked them to come.

"If you go now, they'll know we're here." I turned to Maksim and the crowns. The fractured one whispered, its tune too low to hear. If Morovara was right, it would be needed. "Can you repair it?"

"This here." His fingers hovered over a part where the sigils had been reduced to nothing more than a spiderweb of glass. "I've never seen anything like it."

"We've no time." Koshka turned to Kaz. "Lead the way. Kill on sight."

"You cannot stop the dead," Lumi said. "You should remember that."

Murder shone from Koshka's eyes. "Dying for my king is an honor."

The pitch inside climbed. For Lumi, it was a wind ripping her apart. My molars ached from the tearing sound. Something was in pain.

Morovara had said we needed the glass crowns. I focused on it, trying to ignore the magic.

"I've seen the whole crown. I can describe it," I said.

Maksim raised a brow. "In enough detail? After how long?"

Before our eyes, a crack on the male crown branched, the glass screaming as if in pain. They must be destroying the sigils on the Gate, like on the crowns, I realized. They were one.

Lumi flared. “The Spirits of Tal can feel the Gate again. They’re all coming here.”

“How much time do we have?” Koshka said, one foot on the stairs.

Lumi shook her head. Not enough.

“I, for one, don’t intend to die,” Kaz said as he followed Koshka down. “If you have another solution, hurry up. We’ll be the distraction.”

“Wait!” I called as they proved not everyone magically listened to me.

The music filled my ears.

I needed to run. Run away from Tal. Run and never stop. Or down to Dimitri and final death.

Ealhswip took the image of the crown from my mind and made a fake, but Maksim was right. I could not describe it. Could not summon the image.

I rushed out the way we came, calling behind, “Repair all you can. Don’t let it break.”

Maybe if we held the crowns together long enough it would stall the rest. At least until the dead arrived.

Mage lights danced around me, stones flew under my feet, as I followed memories barely sharper than dreams.

Months ago, I ran down these cavern-like hallways searching for an escape. Inessa left me in the treasury with the Book of Bloodlines and royal secrets. And on a shelf, I had seen the replicated crown. Dimi had said he left it there.

Hope should no longer live inside me. When it had soared, I’d played into Ealhswip’s hands, each decision leading here. I only knew two things she could not have predicted: Dimitri had been unable to leave me dead, and I had returned the real crown, unable to lie to him.

Centuries ago, Ealhswip told her daughter that the only thing that could conquer death is love. *Perhaps she had been right.*

Last time, I had run as straight as possible, thank the Wishmaker, and after only two false turns I arrived at the sigil-protected wall hiding the Talian royalty’s riches.

Inessa had pricked her finger and her blood opened the door, like mine had in the tunnels.

Mother had claimed us descended from nobles, Morovara and the Book of Bloodlines confirmed it, and we bore more than a passing resemblance to Helia von Heskin. But even if royal blood flowed in my veins, it was the wrong royal line.

Unable to do anything else, I pierced my thumb on the spike next to the door and smeared my blood across the sigils.

They warmed under my hand but did not awaken.

I pressed harder, blood trickling down my palm.

The stone did not move.

Inside, my bond to Lumi stretched, like she was pulling away again.

Somewhere in the middle of the very earth itself, something rumbled. A presence too vast for me to comprehend. Like the old gods without the limitless night sky separating us.

The Goddess was coming.

“*Open*,” I prayed and commanded, cajoled and hoped, pushing my magic into the door.

Below my palm, the sigils burned, and a whisper of earth and stone and darkness, barely audible above my heartbeat, joined the music inside me.

Though time was running away like the Taliell in a storm, I did what Morovara had told me. I listened, then I added my own parts to the melody, bending the song by instinct. The sound of Lumi’s laughter, of Dimitri’s exasperated sighs, and Inessa inviting me inside. And my absolute certainty that I was allowed to traipse through the most secure chamber in Tal and that I bore the royal family no ill intentions.

What Ealhswip was doing below pulled until I closed myself off completely. I needed to focus.

Something clicked.

With creaking gears turning, the door swung open. It seemed even sigils had hearts to turn, or perhaps enough of them together imitated the mind of its creators.

Thoughts spun as I rushed past gold and jewels until I spotted the crown. A breath I had not realized I held released with a *woosh*. Dimitri had not had it removed or destroyed, despite disbelieving me.

I lifted it reverently.

It did not spark my blood, the glass coldly perfect, remaining unaffected despite the sentience awakening below. The sigils meticulously etched into the glass no more magical than a painting of a field carried the scents of summer.

With my arm thread through it, I walked up to the doorway again and placed my hand on the faintly glowing sigils.

“This isn’t a treasure so I’m not stealing. I’m no thief,” I declared to whatever magic might hear me. For once, it tasted like truth.

I did not dare to hesitate any longer. With a running start, I threw myself out, protecting the fragile glass.

When the sigil door slammed shut behind me, the crown remained whole in my hands and I alive.

Instantly, I followed the bond back to Lumi, racing faster than ever before.

The Spirits she had warned of were not here yet—perhaps a sigils still stood—but it would not be long.

Back in the crypt, Maksim snatched the crown from my hands without a word. Orso stood guard at the edge of the entrance to

the underground, body tense.

I surveyed the room. One was missing.

"Where is she?"

Orso pointed. "Lumi said we were too slow before disappearing down there. Something about blocking the way."

I removed the wall I so carefully constructed to get into the treasury.

Through the bond, pain like a thousand cuts washed over me. I swayed on my feet.

I had planned and held back. She was my blood and Spirit. Would I even survive if she was used by Ealhswip?

The pain vibrated into my bones. I fell against the wall.

"Fix the crowns then come," I urged Maksim. "Hurry!"

Before anyone could argue, I threw myself down the stairs on legs barely bearing my weight, ready to fly one last time. Lorists say hope will give you wings. In this moment I believed it, for it had stuck with me this far and only needed to carry me a little further.

For the first time, I prayed to the Death Goddess, summoning her true name and face in my mind—*Ixama, blessed be, see me, hear me, turn this way. You let this creature out. Help us!*—for by returning, Ealhswip, the last divine ruler of Tal, had surely angered the Goddess more than I.

For once, death might be on our side.

Vanya

I took the slick stone steps three at a time.

Something below sang to me of grief and love, its tune captivating and terrifying. That it was broken and needed me to make it better. Only the discordant notes of Lumi's pain reminded me of who I was.

Like when I leaped between roofs or off a building, when the wind buffered me high in the sky, I soared.

Life and death, two sides of the same coin, joined me and Lumi, and so was the thing below. Unable to resist, I reached out, wishing to make it whole, only to recoil as the floor leveled. Uncountable glowing Spirits covered a vast cavern's ceiling in unnatural light. In the distance, the Gate's green shine, similar to that of the bone soldiers, mixed with Lumi's white.

The woman I once knew as von Lemerch burned cold blue like the snow carrying winter winds. Neither dead nor alive, she reached for my sister.

The magical song transformed into a cry of pain. With a roar, I ignored all rules—everything Mariska had told me of separation between magics and Morovara of balance—and using both our powers, commanded the living and the dead to stop.

The world paused, and I felt all.

Tal's Spirits pressed down.

The unnaturalness of von Mekeln and the zeal of the priestesses fighting against the two still-standing guards.

And close by, the man I might love and the woman he just married, hurt but, thank the Wishmaker, alive.

Then an invisible force brought me to my knees. Ice wormed itself into my mind. My stomach turned. My throat clenched.

I slammed the walls up, instinctively protecting myself while cutting off my own magic. The nausea subsided while claws kept digging their way through my walls.

Darkness descended, as if someone with immense power had snuffed the light of the dead.

Crawling blindly, I closed in on the remaining green light, hoping Ealhswip and her people would not see any better than me in the dark—a hopeful deception I clung to when no one attacked.

The priestesses' voices rose in a chant, the eerie words tangling with the melody of the dead. Before the Gate stood my sister and a monster wearing a woman's skin.

Caught up in the vision of Lumi and Ealhswip, both with arms raised, fighting to control the dead, only years on the street prevented a yelp from escaping when my toe hit something soft and it moaned.

I pressed my hand over what felt like a mouth.

"Dimitri," I whispered.

It sounded like a prayer to all lost gods.

He moved his lips beneath my hand, and I reluctantly let him go. We could never have been, and he had just married another. In my mind I held him close, kissing him in relief at finding him alive.

"Tempest?" His voice held fear, and I knew it was for me. "You cannot be here."

I closed my eyes and swallowed my feelings. This was not the place. "For once, listen and let me help."

He let out a low, wheezing laugh. "You were right. I cut halfway through her shoulder, and she healed before my eyes. They're stronger than human… You were supposed to run, Tempest. I was supposed to have that one lie. To know that even though I was trapped here you would be out there living the life you wished."

"You tried to force me away to protect me?"

He did not answer and that was enough. There was no time.

His muscles tensed as I followed his arm downward, finding his hands roughly tied.

Even in the dark, the knots barely needed a thought. Years of thieving had taught me a lot of transferable skills.

"What's happened?" I said, forcing myself not to link my fingers with his.

"We married, the wall opened, and your councilwoman hit me in the head with her cane," said a female voice in the dark. "If I had to hazard a guess, I would say they want to destroy that glowing thing."

I crawled to her. *My queen. His wife.* Despite the words locking my breath in my chest and a petty part of me wanting to leave her here, I untied Helia von Heskin's hands. As we got to our feet, a wall of orange and yellow flames entered the cave. Pyre had caught up.

Maksim sprinted our way while Orso threw two knives, drawing the attention of the priestesses.

The Gate's song twisted into a scream.

Ealhswip twisted around, and I felt her attention like a blow as I ran toward the Gate with Dimitri's hand in mine. Above, the Spirits flared, outlining Koshka moving unnaturally fast as she fought von Mekeln. The green Gate stood large enough to drive a carriage through, its twisted glass like frozen lightning or the roots of magic erupting from the earth. In front stood my sister, as if she alone could hold back the world's dead.

The green light rippled like water, and the godlike attention I had felt in the treasury returned.

When only feet away, I saw through the green arch for the first time, and found darkness on the other side. The dead of our world pressed to get through. My sister held back the sea of swirling Spirits, her arms outstretched and straining, and I had no idea how to help. There was no knowing what would happen if the dead crashed into it after what Ealhswip had done to the sigils, but as she had summoned them here, I imagined it would not be good.

The painful wail built in my mind. The pressure forced me forward until my shoulder brushed against Lumi's. "What do we do?"

"It's the Gate of the Dead," said Dimitri. "Solovyova's legend is true. Our marriage should have strengthened it."

"I can hear it crying for help. Whatever you did was not enough," I whispered as my sister's arms shook.

Maksim pressed the crowns into my chest. "I did the best I could. It'll only last a moment so be quick."

My arms automatically closed around the sigiled glass. "What'll happen?"

"No idea. I hope your second crown was correct, for I know none of these sigils."

Ealhswip was almost upon Pyre, seeming to have judged him the largest threat.

Dimitri frowned at the crown. "I felt the magic take hold of me. It should have worked."

"I felt nothing," Helia said from my right. "Besides momentarily blending my magic with yours."

"Could she have gotten to it after I gave it to you?" My voice rose too high and von Mekeln turned to stare into the dark, his eyes burning. Koshka took the opportunity to pierce him through the chest. It did not even slow his next attack.

"You, *Tempest*, are the only one since my mother who has touched that crown. As long as you didn't damage or wear it, it should have worked."

An image of me reflected in the largest mirror I had ever seen, dress torn from running through the woods and eyes bright from longing, flashed in my mind. On my head sat the crown.

"I didn't know it would hurt… Nothing happened."

"Thank the gods," Helia said. "Now you get to marry him."

Dimitri flinched. My own feelings were too much of a mess for me to even dare inspect them.

"We're married—everyone saw us go to the Tower," he grounded out.

Helia waved her hand. "It didn't take, and we already established we're interchangeable in the eyes of the nobility."

As they debated me, Vanya the dead thief, marrying the king of Tal, the Gate called to my magic, telling me to approach and touch with cold death and warm life.

The song invited me to join it in dance. A twirl and we would be one—music and girl never separated again.

Dimitri's strong hand caught mine before I stumbled into the green light.

My sister, who'd had no one to catch her, pressed her hands against the glowing green mist.

"No more arguments. This isn't about you," Lumi said when she saw Dimitri. "Or my sister. Call it what you want—no need for it to be a marriage but do it now, and when it's over, keep her in the land of the living."

Blue and orange flames flashed as Ealhswip backed Pyre against a wall.

Pebbles fell from the ceiling. Lumi cried in pain and rage. The emerald mist flowed until it covered our ankles.

On the other side of the Gate, shadowed creatures moved. The glass screamed as the cracks Ealhswip and the priestesses created widened. It pressed against my mind again. I had felt it when I retrieved the crown from the tree.

It had tasted me. Recognized me as I did it.

Perhaps the Gate itself held the Goddess's will, like the treasury door held the royal family's. Perhaps I had no idea what a god was.

Standing at my sister's side, I tore out of Dimitri's grip and sank my hands into the green mist.

A cold so strong it burned latched onto me. My walls crumbled and the green rippled into a quicksilver mirror. Lumi and I reflected back—four of the same face. Dead and alive. Necromancer and mind witch.

Almost, the Gate seemed to say, *you're almost ready*.

Knowing flowed from it to me. I could not let the things on the other side into Tal. It needed to open and be healed from both

sides for the balance to be restored. For the Spirits to pass from our world to the next. The priestesses had been breaking the sigils closing it while reversing the flow from death to life.

The presence reached inside me, searching for something to latch on to. Men screamed in the dark while I stood frozen, unable to understand.

Listen, Morovara had said.

Kindness, my mother had said.

Sacrifice, Lumi had said. *For change doesn't come from nothing.*

"Place the crown on my head."

Far above me something cracked and Spirits, thousands upon thousands, approached. We were running out of time.

"I don't want to be queen. I'll never tell anyone," I said, struggling to get the words past my chattering teeth. "But this Gate needs someone bound to your line and the crowns. It's all connected. I wore the crown unknowingly."

Dimitri stood behind me, untouching but close enough that if I fell, he would catch me.

"It would always only have fitted you," he said, settling it on my head.

Helia placed the other on Dimitri before I could answer.

Magic flashed, a second explosion of green and silver, and a new bond formed.

"Cut your hands and say the words," Helia said, somehow following my train of thought and trusting me, the sister of her kidnapper, and mind witch who had impersonated her to get close to her future husband.

"There's no need," I said, as it anchored to my very being, the core of magic and hope. "We're already bound."

Eydis had prepared for this. Feared it.

She would have been alone, like I had believed myself. I no longer did.

I reached for Dimitri on one side and Lumi on the other, connecting king, magic, and death.

Someone screamed in unimaginable terror behind us. Dimitri clenched his bloody hand to mine.

Sigils shone across the arch, spinning as if alive. It knew what it needed, seemed to sense the urgency as the ceiling shook and glass trembled.

We were opening the Gate and mending what our ancestors had destroyed.

The words came unbidden.

"I swear to protect Tal, to ward against the darkness and give the dead peace. I swear that I'll protect the Gate in death and beyond. I bind myself to you."

Spirits streamed into the cave from above, their lights reflecting against the wet stalactites. Ealhswip had compelled them to help her. It no longer mattered. The Gate was calling them home.

Lumi's magic spread, and through her, I felt the pain of each one, their life stories trapped inside the glowing cores.

The Gate's shine dimmed until only the unending light of the Spirits remained.

My ears popped; a winter gale tore through the previously still air.

Before the three of us, the Gate of the Dead opened for the first time in three centuries, and I clung to the two people I loved as the first dead streamed past us.

Beyond the light, Ealhswip roared her rage. On the other side of the quicksilver surface, the shadows answered.

Vanya

The green-silver magic latched on to Lumi and pulled. She was going to the other side—the land of the dead, a dominion of the Goddess we knew nothing about—and it was tearing me apart. I could not lose her when we had just found each other again.

Trapped between life and death, I clutched to my incorporeal sister on my left and my love on my right.

I was dead and alive, whole and broken.

Vanya and Lumi, light and dark, on one side.

Tempest and king, blood of Ealhswip and Herebov, on the other.

The bonds stretched until I felt Lumi's touch on my cheek—so like Mother when she sang us to sleep—and opened eyes I had not realized I'd closed. Lumi stood by my side, her cold blazing light flowing into the quicksilver, my own shining like the sun.

"*Let me go,*" she said so only I could hear. *"I understand now. A queen left; a queen must return—and with Popova's curse broken, we're one as we were always meant to be."*

A matching, glowing crown had appeared on Lumi's head as she pushed her hand through the portal. A queen of the dead.

The Gate echoed her words as the cracks at the base of the arch widened, splitting sigils and text in the old language. Maksim pressed his hands against the splintering as if he could fuse them through willpower alone.

My sister was half gone, arm and shoulder disappearing, where I could not follow.

"It is my fault. I killed you," I said through tears.

With Lumi no longer holding them back, the Spirits of the world, too long kept in Tal, streamed between us, pushing us apart.

Dimitri's hand tightened in mine. An unnatural wind tore at my dress as the floor trembled, but I could not take my eyes off my sister.

She shook her head.

"I love you. Death is not the end, just a different tomorrow."

A claw of shadows reached out from the Gate, slicing into the Spirits, pushing through. Lumi let go of my hand, threw herself on the creature, and before I could react, disappeared into the Gate.

Dimitri's grip pulled me back, a controlled tornado keeping everyone else away.

The bond between me and my sister that had survived curses, distance, and death snapped.

For the first time, I was alone.

Empty where she once was.

Hollow.

Silence.

I was barely aware of Dimitri still at my side, fighting his own battle, of Pyre's fire going out, of danger approaching, but as the consciousness withdrew, my overextended mind heard nothing.

The silver Gate returned to transparent green, like a world seen through a glass bottle. Lumi stood surrounded by Spirits against the gathering darkness Ealhswip sought to bring into our world. With them, no one would be able to stop her. The dead had regained their human shape, as if entering the Goddess's realm gave them back something they lost.

More flowed through—a seemingly endless stream—but I could no longer feel them. Lumi's power over the dead had left me.

The shadows clashed with the Spirits, proving it was possible to die again as they were shredded.

The crown on Lumi's head still shone, keeping most away.

I laid my hand against the transparent surface, needing it to tell me what to do to help. My light faltered, magic almost spent.

A shadowed figure leaped past her and pushed its howling snout through the Gate, calling for others to follow. Dying here

did not matter if we did not restore the balance.

The world quaked. A wail tore through the air.

The wind calmed.

Dimitri's hand slackened and slipped out of mine.

I turned away from my sister's battle, attempting to catch him, as boulders hit an invisible force above us—Helia. Then she, as if unable to carry the weight, collapsed on the ground as well. The stones rained down around us, one smashing into my shoulder.

I barely felt the pain as I saw Ealhswip, Lord von Mekeln, and the remaining two priestesses disappear under the rockfall. With the last of her power, Helia had given us another moment.

Time for some more improvisation and idiocy, for no one could plan for this.

The Gate's surface rippled when my hands pierced it.

As if we were still bound and she knew my thoughts, Lumi's hands closed around mine. I pushed my magic into her, and Lumi guided it into the cracked arch on the other side, giving life to the world of the dead so that it could heal itself.

One on each side, mirror images but so different, we offered balance.

This had never been about forcing it back together, thinking we humans knew better, but providing it with the means to do so itself after Ealhswip stole part of its power when she forced her way back.

The magic played the sigils like notes, pure music lifting me. The infinite consciousness I imagined was the Gate or the Goddess or something I could not even fathom, drew power out of me until I illuminated the cavern like a newborn sun.

Until I screamed, and its song joined with that of Tal.

Until the crown cracked, and the Gate began to close.

Inside me, Lumi's voice sounded from far away, and I knew this was the final time.

"You're not the only one allowed risky, harebrained acts. Consider this mine and make the changes I could not. Live fully and without excuses. Be kind as only you can be. Fight, even if you think it's useless."

There were no words left in me. No way to express my love and loss.

For a second time, she left me, but this time I could feel her hand in mine and knew that I needed to let her go. She had lived a separate life for years while I had used her as an excuse to not go after what I wanted.

She asked me to be brave enough to live.

One by one, I opened my fingers, until our palms rested against each other, and I let go of the fear and pain and guilt. I would grieve her until the end of my days, but I would not carry the weight of her decisions. I would make my own.

Stepping away was my greatest leap, trusting myself to make it on my own.

Lumi's smile dropped and her eyes widened in fear, focusing behind me.

I moved too late.

As a body hit mine, I crashed into the ground and the final remnants of my magic and light extinguished. The green glow of the Gate cast a sickly shine across the ground.

The creature I still thought of as Ealhswip but bore no resemblance to Eydis's mother, Herebov's wife, or Dimitri's councilwoman, stood over me, eyes burning, torn flesh struggling to reform. Half her skull had been caved in by Helia's stones, clothing burned away by Pyre. Shadows and blue fire twisted around her mutilated body, as if death itself was leaking out of her wounds.

My head pounded. The world swam. I wanted to cry and laugh and scream and faint. Only a sliver of my magic remained after giving Lumi everything I had. Full of guilt, I recently accepted death with the noose around my neck.

In so many ways I had not yet lived, rather waited for a future that never came. Done what others told me. Expected the world to change while I stayed the same.

Dimitri lay next to me, the crown cracked by his head, blood leaking from his eyes. *Was he still breathing? Had his Spirit already passed through the Gate?*

Rolling to my feet, I grabbed the sword at his side and threw myself on Ealhswip, screaming my rage and pain. None of us had asked for this.

The blade struck true. It did not matter.

Ealhswip's laugh gurgled from her collapsed lungs.

With a dismissive slap, she sent me flying. My head rang, vision swam, and pain sharp enough that I had to check if she'd split my skull open, kept me down as she limped closer.

"How many times do I have to kill you?" She spat warm blood across my cheek. "I got rid of your mother's diluted line and anyone else possibly strong enough to restore the Gate. Poisoned and killed every mageline in Tal even remotely powerful."

Inch by painful inch, I dragged myself away, the world spinning.

"Imagine my surprise when I saw you—the spitting image of the princess from Oberwalden. And you showed no signs of the magic taint, you sneakily hiding your heritage. I should've killed you as soon as I sensed your sister's power, but you were so perfectly willing to be used."

She kicked me in the side. Something snapped.

My body threatened to shut down and take my mind away from here and into oblivion, but I had promised to fight when it seemed impossible. To hope.

Unable to drag myself further, I lay still, watching the last Spirits disappear through the Gate.

"I did everything right this time, and still you stupid, short-lived things had to go against me."

She stomped on my shinbone, snapping it.

My screams echoed through the silent cave. Darkness closed in until Ealhswip pressed her palm against the broken bones in my chest and brought me back.

"I ensured they did not have the real crown to bond with the Gate. I killed that old fool of a king. I poisoned the city and tamed the dead. Still, here you are. Even that idiot prince. All he had to do was get married on the correct day and open the passage down to my Gate. You closed it, but don't think I cannot still eradicate your lines and restore Tal to its proper rule. Your king has no heirs. Oberwalden will not stand by him. The clans are already waiting to see how this plays out."

Blue flame, almost the white of the dead, spread from her hands into my chest.

Pain as I had never known tore through me, eating my screams.

There were no thoughts.

Impossible stars danced before my eyes.

The entity that had created the Gate was gone, done with us.

Ealhswip bent close, her broken face filling my spotted vision. "I'll never let your Spirit pass to the other side. What was broken once, can break again, and I have nothing but time. My rule should never have ended. Killing the last of Herebov's children will be a pleasure."

I sank into a darkness filled with pain as Dimitri's mismatched, bloody eyes opened.

Dimitri

My consciousness returned with her desperate cry.

I had used every scrap of magic inside me to keep what used to be my councilwoman away while Vanya and her sister repaired the Gate. Too much magic for my mind to handle. Still, Vanya's broken shape brought sharpness back. A singular purpose. *She could not be dead.*

I let her go once.

Let her die once.

Never again.

The Gate shone softly behind me, its glass arch twisting like living vines, the man who had brought the crowns leaning against its base, seemingly unharmed. Helia lay on my other side, unconscious or dead, and Ealhswip stood over Tempest's body, as if considering her next move.

In the ultimate game of King's Conquest, my ancestor started this when he took Tal. Once, her cause was just, but her means were not.

I had been ready to throw my life away for revenge, selfishly ignoring all consequences, hurting the ones around me without care.

I should have pushed Eki for the truth.

Listened to Alexei.

Learned from Solovyova.

Kept Vanya close no matter the cost.

The nightmarish creature that had once been the last divine ruler of Tal came closer, no longer pretending to be human.

The women fallen around me held magic beyond anything I possessed even when rested. We had torn apart Ealhswip's flesh and only slowed her.

Without moving, I whispered to the sigil crafter, "Does it only go one way?"

He shook his head imperceptibly. "It's still healing."

Ealhswip had almost reached me.

I flexed my muscles, the world swimming before my eyes.

Physically, I was not seriously injured. My mind… Well, I would never know.

Another step.

I tensed, my eyes seeking Tempest.

I love you, exactly as you are, I thought, hoping she heard the words I could not say out loud. *I choose you every time.*

Ealhswip's fire formed before her hands as she stopped over my body.

Something resembling a smile lifted her torn cheek. A tongue flittered across broken lips, savoring her kill.

Slowly, she bent down, as if she had final words for me as well.

I played dead until she was so close the fire around her singed my skin, remaining still when she nudged my foot, testing if I was conscious. As she started to speak, sure I was no threat, I kicked out her legs and wrapped my arms around her burning shape.

A mage's final curse was saved for death.

The first, I had used to punish people for a child who never died.

On the roof in Lowtown with Alexei at my side, I had voiced the second to speed the rain.

The same curse I'd once uttered for my child shaped in my mind. I put everything I was into it a second time, all the trust and hope and beauty Vanya had shown me, the grief and anger and love I never showed, and let it go. *May those who hurt mine, be*

hurt in kind.

Pain screamed but my fuzzy mind could ignore it as I squeezed, praying I was not repeating the past.

She might be unnatural, impossible to injure, and incredibly strong, but she was also an old woman weighing less than a third of me.

I rolled us to the side, closed my eyes, and let the brilliant emerald laced with quicksilver embrace us. For the first time, she screamed in fear.

The glow became a green sky over a barren land, illuminated by silver stars and moon.

The woman in my arms dug claw-like nails into my throat.

As my vision darkened, my arms loosened, and she pushed away.

I clumsily grabbed at her, missed, and crawled to my feet, following in her wake.

I expected her to attack or run. Instead, she stopped, staring through the settling dust.

People—young and old, light and dark, Talian and foreign—surrounded us. Soldiers in antiquated bone armor stood shoulder to shoulder with children, the youngest carried on backs and in arms.

They separated for the woman whose face had haunted my nightmares and prayers.

Ealhswip hissed like a snake.

Lumi smiled.

"Your creatures ran away before the wrath of those you wronged. The Gate's healing." Tempest's twin looked over her shoulder. "What shall we do with her?"

Too many voices to understand called out over each other for death—whatever that meant on this side—and torture.

"You think you can stand against me? This has been my realm since the Goddess forsook it."

Men and women strode to the front, fire, wind, and water spinning around them.

Lumi nodded. "Alone, perhaps not. But with all the murdered mages of Tal at my side?"

The wind lifted Ealhswip from the ground with power I could never have summoned, while fire ate her remaining flesh and blood was torn through her skin.

Lumi watched together with the other dead before turning to me.

"You were willing to sacrifice yourself to bring her here."

It was not a question, but her disbelief was clear.

"I'm king, it was my responsibility." I hesitated—*if I could not tell the truth here, when could I?* "She was killing your sister. I love her."

Lumi pursed her twisted lip and stared at me as if she, like Tempest, could read my feelings. Silence stretched between us.

The dead drifted away with Ealhswip's mangled body, until we stood alone in the Gate's soft green sheen.

Lumi turned toward it and nodded as if to herself.

"A little life still remains in you—enough to send you back without breaking the Gate again if the Goddess approves. Once, this was how the divine rulers of Tal earned her blessing. Ealhswip knew what she was doing when she broke it. Though not being a death keeper, you'll need a little help." She smiled and true amusement danced in her eyes. "I only wanted to change my city for the better. It seems through you, I'll succeed after all."

"Don't destroy it again for me. I knew what I was doing."

She scoffed at my accepting tone. "A curse from the dead can be a blessing for the living, and I never used mine in life. A curse also holds part of our magic, perhaps enough for the Gate to let you pass. When you are ready, visit Popova in Lowtown and say I sent you. You might discover you're not the only one returned from the brink of death."

She placed both hands on my chest and pushed.

Though she should not have been able to move me, I dropped into the emerald mist, her voice ringing in my ears as I fell and fell between worlds.

"May he find no more happiness than the woman he loves."

"May sleep not find him unless he brings the poorest up each day."

"May he, for my sister, LIVE."

Her words wrapped around me, squeezing and shaping. Three death curses turned blessings by forgiveness.

Somewhere, the Wishmaker and Death Goddess nodded their approvals, and a too-cold body welcomed my Spirit back.

Vanya

The first thing I felt was the itching—like ants running over my organs—of magical healing.

The previously roaring pain in my collapsed chest was manageable. My fingers twitched at the end of mended bones and a hand pressed mine in return.

My vision focused and the bright surroundings turned into a bare, white room. Sunlight streamed in through the open window as a breeze swayed the curtains. They seemed alive, telling tales of their own in a dance I could not understand. The world wanted to tell me everything. Stone by immensely heavy stone, I rebuilt my mental wall. Magic overuse still painted a kaleidoscope across my vision when I turned.

Mariska sat next to me, holding my hands in hers. One of the men Koshka had led into the crypt lay dozing in a chair, hair tousled and clothes wrinkled like he had not changed in days.

"Where am I?" I asked, though it mostly came out as a groan.

Mariska brought a cup to my mouth. One sip of the bitter brew, and I choked.

"Drink up. We think we've found a cure and there is no knowing what you were exposed to."

Swallowing with a grimace, I tried speaking again. "What happened?"

"Dimi went missing before the wedding, and I couldn't get to him to tell him our plans. Then the warning bells rang, and I was locked in the hall. The fighting had mostly blown over when the doors opened, and they called for healers to come to the Tower." She bit her lip as if waiting for me to reprimand her. I squeezed her hand, knowing she was a much better friend than I deserved, and she continued. "Everyone was asleep, drugged, despite the Tower shaking until I thought it would collapse. Then Spirits—more than I thought existed—passed and sank through the earth. When they disappeared, the fighting stopped."

"They're gone," I managed, remembering the dead standing at my sister's side. My vision focused more. "What happened then?"

"The guards said Dimi, had gone to the crypt to marry, but the earthquake blocked the stairs. We sent for builders to clear them. In the chaos none could be found until the next morning—that was yesterday." Mariska brightened. "By midday Dimi exited carrying you, barely breathing, followed by Helia von Heskin, who had removed the stones further down—she really is awfully powerful—and three more—a teenager who quickly left, a female bone soldier and Kaz"—she nodded to the sleeping blond man who I finally recognized from my trial as Kazimir Bersigov—"were injured but alive. They carried three who have still to wake up. I don't know how many couldn't escape."

My sluggish mind struggled to understand her too-fast words as the Day of the Dead swam in my mind. Memories disconnected and reordered. I led people to their death, let Lumi go, and somehow survived. And Dimitri had lived. A presence larger than myself, perhaps larger than this world, had touched me through a gate leading to a land of death.

"What did they say happened down there?" I asked, wondering if I could trust my mind after expending so much magic.

"No one tells me anything—I was hoping you would."

I swallowed. "We did it. Healed the Gate. The dead of Tal left. She… Ealhswip—von Lemerch… is she gone?"

The last I remembered was her killing me. *Or so I had thought*.

Mariska frowned. "The councilwoman did not return. Was she behind you pretending to be Helia?"

I could only nod. One day I would tell her everything—she was my friend. Had come when I asked, would stand up for me without questions—but not today.

"Is Dimitri here?"

Mariska looked away, her previously animated face closing. "Some of his injuries required healing, but he left the hospital yesterday evening."

Relief and disappointment mixed until I had to close my eyes. I should not have expected anything to change. I was a

criminal, a supposedly dead one, he had ordered to leave Tal.

Under the earth, he crowned me. *Chose me*. Or was that the magic overuse twisting the past into wishes?

"Are there guards waiting to arrest me?" I asked and nodded to Kaz. "Is he here to guard me?" Dimitri had said if they saw me again, he could not save me. That, I remembered clearly.

Mariska let out something between a snort and a laugh, waking Kazimir, or maybe he had been listening to us.

He rose with a bow, completely at odds with the stark room and my bedridden state.

"As if I had not spent enough days in this hospital, I was ordered not to leave your side until you woke, so I'm doubly glad to hear you still sound sane. You, Lady Vanya von Heskin, officially recognized cousin of Princess Helia von Heskin, have no record."

"Helia did what?" I stammered, sure one of us was not as sane as this stranger claimed.

Mariska's face split into a grin. "The Princess came here as soon as we healed her scrapes and declared you her long-lost cousin. Ordered papers drawn up and signed them right here. There is some debate as to what to call you since she left for the palace before announcing your proper title. Most are going with Lady, though others insist on erring on the side of caution and prefer Princess."

I fell back against the pillows, staring at the bright sunlight outside. *Princess Vanya*. The name filled me with fear. There was no hiding in the shadows anymore. *What would Lumi have said if she was here?*

But I was not the only one who had changed. My sister had asked me to live without fear and use the power given to me for good. To never forget where I came from and allow hope its wings.

I no longer needed to run from anything I realized.

By naming me family, Helia provided me with a safety I never expected. Vanya Komarova had been executed for her crimes. Vanya von Heskin had committed none. I would not even need to hide the noble's sigil on my arm. Helia had made all my lies true.

Later, I could decide what to do with all the tomorrows I had not expected to have. For now, I closed my eyes and let the chatter of Mariska and Kazimir, noticing her nervous laugh follow his deadpan jokes, wash over me.

One thing was sure, I would not any time soon leap into the air without knowing where to land. This summer had held enough adventure even for me.

Outside, the first fall winds blew, and my mind drifted to the man capable of controlling them. Somehow, the prince who only thought of revenge had saved us all.

It was better that he left before I woke. Even with Helia's proclamation, we belonged to different worlds. Never could we walk together in daylight as ourselves. Despite it all, I smiled imagining the rumors that would have caused—me, his wife.

Together, we had prevented a worse tomorrow. That should be enough. Love had done its part, now it was up to me to discover what came after you saved your city.

Vanya

Five months later

My last customers of the day left. It had been a simple contract signing where I magically confirmed neither intended to break the terms. They had taken longer than anticipated, requiring proof of my skill, and I was running late.

After closing the safe Orso had personally installed, I pulled on a mint coat, locked up, and stepped into the early spring rain.

When I returned to Mandible Street after the three-day in the hospital, Svetlana had made no secret she wanted me out of her space and deals, for while we might no longer be opponents—almost friends, perhaps family—living together was too close for either's comfort. None of Dimitri's money remained, and I had been at a loss of how to make more without resorting to illegal means again—something I refused to do. I would rather endure Lana's spiked comments and return to clean her chamber pots. That had fortunately not been required.

Nataliya had caught me after a visit with Lana, asking I come to the Merchant's Guild the next day to witness the conclusion of a house sale. She suspected the seller had fudged the details. The discordant notes of his dishonesty struck me as soon as I entered the room. With my hints, the negotiations took another turn, and the final price was reduced by a third. Nataliya and her husband had been more than pleased, and I left with one commission and five potential clients.

A month later, I bought my own lot in Lowtown. To my surprise, Lana helped me find workers to tear down the fire-damaged tenement and built a modest two-story house with a shop and apartment. It had a rooftop garden I longed to fill when the heat returned. Until then, it was my spot to speak with the stars and Lumi. A place all to myself, such as I had never had before.

Learning to be alone and set my own path meant failures and stumbles. I was still not sure who I was, but I was learning I needed kindness for myself as well. And success held its own thrills, not dissimilar to all the other leaps I'd taken. No matter how many times I fell, I got up again.

Lowtown rebuilt around me as the fall winds calmed Tal.

Some had died in the Gateways fire, and poisoned food had still been sold the following months, but the hospital had treated everyone who asked. It could have been much worse. By the time winter settled, the clans and Oberwalden had sold us enough food to prevent famine. As the prices declined, I wondered if Dimitri had emptied the royal treasury to provide for the poor. And each time I thought of him, I returned to the worn journal Ealhswip had gifted me. I'd discovered drawings of griffons so lifelike they were ready to fly off the page and places I longed to visit. But his real skill showed in the people. I spent evenings studying Alexei's face, smiling at Mariska, and tearing up as I saw myself over and over. The words I read echoed in my mind—anger, longing, confusion. His plans for revenge were not committed to the pages, but I saw it between the lines. The more I told myself I'd let him go, the tighter I clutched the journal and compass still around my neck.

Still, time passed and it became easier. Days passed without turning toward the palace. Nights without tears.

As the streets and Taliell froze, few braved the weather to draw bloody skeletons, and when it warmed again, the survivors silently drifted back to their farms with their families. Not that everything was good. Tal was still Tal. The poor scrambled for the scraps of the rich, merchants took what they could from you, and I heard of more bandits on the roads.

Through it all, I worked furiously, knowing what poverty felt like and enamored with building instead of stealing. Only nights when the mage sickness rose and I could not block out the world, was I forced to rest. Mariska had told me it might never go away. Mages were insane, everyone knew that. So when I heard people's thoughts as loud as their voices, I stayed with my great-grandmother, taking solace in the quietness of the Spirits.

Tonight was my reward for months of work—a fancy I never thought possible. It was frivolous to the point of danger, but Lana had confirmed my books were in good order, and I had secure work lined up until summer.

Irina, my part-time coach driver, opened the door for me while tilting her hat with a cordial, “Princess.”

Even after all these months it felt like a role, but one I was growing into as I used all the tricks I had learned on the street and the magic I had gained since to fulfill Lumi’s dream. Tal was progressing, even if we had to drag it there, as Popova, the new councilwoman of Lowtown, was fond of saying.

Dimitri had been announcing changes, seeming no longer to care whose toes he stepped on. The Rivertown hospital clinic was under construction, each neighborhood had elected Council representatives, several judges had been arrested for taking bribes, and—maybe the largest of all—we had an almost four-year-old crown princess.

When the criers and broadsheets announced Dasha’s existence, I rejoiced for him. He had the family and future his father tried to kill. While there had been no further announcements, I often imagined Dimitri, Eki, and the beautiful daughter they must have made and wondered if his family inspired the work he put into Tal.

My carriage crossed Dragon Bridge, where Lumi died and everything changed. At the mooring stood a new statue of a young woman with cut hair, determined eyes, and scarred lip. She had attempted to kill the crown prince and failed, while I might have had a hand, however unknowing, in murdering the previous king. Ealhswip had claimed the kill, but he sickened the day after I snuck into his chambers, and I no longer believed in coincidences. It would remain one of the many truths she had taken with her back to the realm of the dead.

Not that anyone knew about attempted and successful murders.

Still, it shocked me Dimitri had allowed a statue of Lumi—not that he had been involved in raising it. During one of my three-day visits, Morovara had told me of the people coming to the temples after the Day of the Dead saying they had seen the Goddess walk the streets in the shape of a girl. How she had spoken to them, promising tomorrow would be better. And because of her blessing they did not eat the poisoned food or get trapped in the fire and fighting.

Then, while we were below the Women’s Tower, all the Spirits of Tal had covered the sky, turning night into day, before disappearing. For this as well, the people of Tal thanked the Goddess. So a river of pennies and chipped coppers had flowed into the Temple’s coffers to honor my sister. I thought Morovara secretly liked seeing the statue of her great-granddaughter, the one she had planned to mold into the future high priestess. If Lumi had been here still, I liked to believe she would have laughed.

The spring rains kept the pilgrims away, but in summer they would return, though the dead no longer lingered as they had before. All Spirits came to Tal, but most moved on before the season changed. The older ones that had haunted the City of Bones and Roses for centuries, illuminating the nights and hiding the stars, were gone beyond the Gate.

I cracked my walls to brush against the living as we passed, listening and sometimes calming an old hurt, providing support when a heartbroken boy doubted himself, soothed the pain of scrubbed knees, and eased loneliness. Acknowledged worries and hopes.

The world hummed in satisfaction, bringing me the tunes it thought I should hear, for in the winter dark, I had finally learned to listen.

At night, the music still sometimes overwhelmed me, and I would return to my old existence, drifting through the streets, watching the world. But I had promised Lumi to live. Tonight was a step toward that, one I had dreamt of for too long.

Irina halted the horses, then opened the door and offered me a hand to step down.

The Royal Theater towered over me, seeming larger than the place I had climbed when no one was looking. Where Dimitri had held me in his arms on the day I believed all my dreams were coming true.

Seeing the glittering crowd, my steps faltered. My clothes were not nearly as fine. My breeding less refined.

But I was bold and strong and a foreign princess with her own box. And a dangerous mage none wanted to offend.

I would belong here as well.

My time sneaking in through the window was past.

The dancers twirled below.

I had accepted I would never stand before an audience again; at least, not on a stage such as this. My road was another, and the surety of my path was the one solid part of my life.

At the end of a long day of settling disputes and ensuring contracts were kept, I relaxed safely in the house I bought with my own funds and found a contentedness I had not known existed. Lumi had been right; there were things which mattered more than happiness. That did not mean I did not think about her and Dimitri each night.

Someone entered my private balcony. I could not read their mind, but I knew that obsidian shape like my own mental stone wall and Lumi’s archive.

Without turning away from the actors below, I sensed him slide into the chair next to mine. We were alone and yet public. Anyone who looked up would spot the freshly crowned king next to the Mind Witch of Lowtown.

My breath hitched and hands clenched, remembering staring into his unseeing eyes and believing it the end.

"I wanted to take you here after you told me how you enjoyed the theater, Princess."

"Stop calling me that."

My cheeks heated as I forced my hands to relax.

The white dancers fell, dead and ready for rebirth, while a red one rose into the air.

"But it's the truth. Your cousin confirmed it in Oberwalden a month ago."

Shaking my head, I did not argue. Others might call me princess, but it sounded different coming from him. Carried lies and deception, reminding me of a time when he did not know my name. The fact that I had a noble cousin had been easy to accept. My unknown father had, after all, visited my mother, proving he had both money and a taste for women. That he was the brother of the Queen of Oberwalden was still in the pile of things to deal with much later.

Dimitri bent closer and like a flower feeling the warmth of the sun, I inched closer still.

"Can we talk in private?" he said in a voice others might have thought cold.

I heard the pain and hidden plea.

I had imagined our reunion countless times. Reality was nothing like it, as he was neither ripping the clothes off me, devouring me with kisses, nor having me arrested for remaining in Tal.

"I don't think that is a good idea, my king."

My own pain shook my voice. *Don't hurt me,* it said. I was building a life of my own, one out in the light, without lies and deceptions.

"Just a moment of your time." His eyes drifted down to the clock I still had around my neck. "You kept it. I—"

"It wouldn't be good for you to be seen with a heart turner."

I was still healing, and one look from him would tear open every scabbing wound.

The silence stretched. Dancers twirled. The finale built.

The pounding orchestra music crashed into me. Tears stained my cheeks. Furious at myself and him, I wiped each away. He had no right to invade the one luxury I had allowed myself. To believe the tears for him.

The last note hung in the air. People stood and applauded. Still, we sat there in silence. Only when he placed his bare hand on my gloved one did I turn. He was as I remembered him despite the superficial changes. The wound on his left cheek the healers had not been able to fully remove was slowly fading. The black hair had regrown until it brushed his shoulders, unbound and wild like when we flew.

His blue and brown eyes cut into me from behind the familiar closed expression. The plain uniform was impeccable.

"Tempest."

I pulled my hand away. "That's not my name either, my king."

"Vanya," he said, as if tasting the syllables for the first time. Never had my name sounded that good before. "Whatever else has changed, to you I always want to be Dimi."

The earnestness stole my breath away and my stomach clenched, the tears from before threatening to return.

"Why are you here, Dimi?" His nickname was a decadence I should not allow myself despite his words.

As he pulled his fingers through his hair, I remembered burying my own in it. Playing with it, clenching it in passion.

"You haunt my dreams," he said, peeling away my glove and I could not move. "You enter my every quiet moment. It doesn't matter what you did, what you are. I trust you and love you. Vanya von Heskin, I have come to ask you to dance."

For once, I was speechless. How I had dreamt of him saying those words. For I loved him, Dimitri Alexandre Ivanov, King of Tal.

There had been no escaping that truth the previous months. But I had also had time to think. So, I made the hardest decision I had ever done, because it was the right thing to do.

"But they'll all see and question if I'm controlling you. You have your daughter and Eki, and a marriage contract with Helia."

His royal mask cracked. Desperation shone in his eyes.

He grabbed my bare hand, and I let him. When he looked like this, I would let him do anything.

"I have a child and heir; the contract has been renegotiated into a trade agreement for now. You created rumors from the first night and we are still here. Let's give them something more to talk about. *Please,* dance with me."

The last words were no louder than a whisper but cut deeper than any shout would have. This man, born to be king, had never begged for anything before, and I knew he would let me go. No matter how it hurt him, he would respect my decision.

"I'm not asking for show, duty, or anyone else. Not as a king, but for me and because I want nothing else," he continued. "I should have trusted you when you revealed who you were and showed me your heart. Should have trusted you when you told me about Ealhswip. Past hurts and fear blinded me. Still, I beg you to trust me when I say, I'll spend a lifetime making up for it if you let me."

I brushed my fingers over his cheek, and he closed his eyes, leaning against my hand.

When I pulled away, he caught my wrist, and there was a new resolution in his eyes and the distinctive obsidian walls I felt before he entered melted away.

Power flowed from where skin met skin. It was always there now, ready for me to use and abuse. This time it was easy to

reject until he nodded his permission.

The grief was not gone but mellowed, and a surety had replaced his fears, but more than anything there was an impossible want and fierce determination laced with that fragile note I knew as hope.

"I can't be a queen—I don't even know how to be a princess."

"I only ask for a chance for us to get to know each other. Vanya, married or not, together or separate, I'm yours, and willing to fight for us unless you tell me to walk away. Every day since the Day of the Dead, I've worked to set Tal up so that if something happened to me it would continue to prosper, and we could have a chance. Tell me you feel nothing and that there's no hope."

My body screamed at my brain to stop fighting this. That this man had showed me responsibility and love. That he had seen me at my worst and still came back. Still…

"You don't know me. I'll never live in the shadows again."

His fingers played with mine, calluses rubbing together. "I should have known when I saw your hands. These are the hands of someone who works for what they need. A fighter. An equal. One day, when we're both ready, I will ask and place the repaired glass crown on your head—it'll only ever fit you."

And with that, he broke me. The arguments were still there, but he had met me halfway, and I loved him. This was worth fighting and hoping for.

I pulled my hand back, instantly missing his warm touch, and stood.

A look of resignation flashed across his chiseled face before I closed the distance between us and buried my fingers in his silky hair.

It was the claiming kiss I'd burned to give him from the moment he stepped onto my balcony. Kissing him as myself, the daughter of a courtesan, former thief of Lowtown. As a free woman. In public.

For a moment, he sat frozen, emotions of surprise and longing playing from his skin to mine. Then he kissed me back.

Lips and tongues fought. I nipped him and was rewarded with a groan.

His hands roamed my body, slipping under the fashionably short coat.

About to melt into his lap, a distant gasp pulled me back, and I realized though the play had ended and music stopped, no one had left. They all stared as Dimitri rose and offered me his hand with a courtly bow and a dangerous smile.

The orchestra struck up the wild and joyful tune they had played on the Sinking Spoon.

"They're all watching," I said, hesitating. "You sure you want to do this?"

"I've never wanted anything more in my life. Now, will you come, or do I have to chase you down again?"

I did not waste another moment.

Arm in arm, we strode down before the nobles and merchants of Tal, the king and the foreign princess of Oberwalden, finally without any masks or deception.

I could not promise our future held only joy and a happy ever after but knew we would approach it with kindness and work to make each tomorrow better. And one day, hopefully far from now, my Spirit would pass through the green mist to join my mother and Lumi, and I would tell them all about it.

I imagined they would approve.

As Dimitri twirled me on the stage I had dreamed of since my first dance teacher described it in awe, I was no longer falling.

I was flying.

Get the exclusive epilogue of Vanya and Dimitri's happy ever after from Mariska's point of view HERE

Did you enjoy Claiming Glass?
Please share your thought on **Goodreads** and **Amazon** and help make this book a success

TALES OF
BONES &
ROSES

Spinning Fire: A Rumpelstiltskin Retelling, the next book in the Tales of Bones & Roses Series, is coming in late 2024. Read on for a sneak peek of how Alexei and Ansa's story continue.

Spinning Fire

Alexei

Something went *thunk-thunk-thunk* inside my chest, and it was not my heart.

Diffuse memories of pain and blood, rain and fire fought to pull me under again.

They twisted into a flaming redhead always out of reach.

She was home and kindness and bravery—and not for me. Her burning shape stopped, waiting for me to catch her.

"Stay away," a voice said, "or you won't be able to leave."

Pain pierced my chest.

Darkness.

An aged dark-skinned woman, gold teeth glittering, demanded I answer her again and again.

Agony tore through me.

Ropes secured my arms and legs.

I screamed in answer to the woman's question.

I would have given her anything at that point. Perhaps I had, for this time the room sharpened around me and the pain remained a distant ache.

Someone familiar was speaking. His voice had woken me, I realized, bridging nightmares to reality.

The room solidified—clean with sturdy wood furniture and colorful woven wall-hangings. Talian and utterly unfamiliar. Finding I was no longer tied to the bed, I sat, only for vertigo to force me down again. The *thunk-thunk-thunk* stuttered. I did not need to be told that was bad. Luckily, the voices came closer.

"You had no right," Dimitri, Crown Prince of Tal and my best friend growled.

Memories spun—his voice breaking in agony. A mob. A knife entering my chest. Death, or so I'd thought as I fell onto the muddy street.

"You'd rather I left him where I found him?" the woman of the gilded smile said. "He was practically on my doorstep. Be glad, I took him in. It's only right you provide payment for the service."

"I'll give you what you want. Just let me see him." The irritation in Dimi's voice mixed with a pleading tone I did not recognize. I struggled to sit again, only to give up when the edges of my vision darkened.

"All in good time," she continued. "A deal, then the exchange, my king. I hear you're changing the City Council. Seems representation is in order. Lowtowners—my people—fought for Tal while you were busy getting married."

"You want a council seat?"

My mind snagged on the way she said '*deal'* like a yarn caught on a nail, unraveling… The image of her bending over me returned. I had forgotten something important.

My hand drifted to my chest, as if it knew what my mind did not.

Thunk-thunk-thunk.

They had kept speaking, but now they quieted—they had struck their own deal, it seemed. But what had—

The steps stopped just outside the open door.

"And he'll recover?" Dimitri asked, as if hesitant to turn the final corner.

"Our deal is for me to release him to you, King, but he'll have to keep his own bargain. Three year ago, your Alexei ruined a very lucrative engagement I arranged. As I fixed his heart, it seemed appropriate he pay in kind."

The steps halted, but I was no longer paying attention.

Memories of a winter huddled on barges, dancing at parties and fire of a very different kind returned. Of something akin to love.

Red hair hidden in a bun. Her body in plain dresses as if they could disguise her beauty. It had made me a fool.

I'd only disrupted one engagement, fallen for one woman, and given her my heart and name. It had been two years since I visited home—since I saw Ansa, but not a day since I longed to.

But you're not husband material, the voice inside whispered. *You're a good time and as fickle as the wind.*

Von Uster, spymaster and my employer, had kept me busy, and Ansa no longer needed me. It'd been better to move on for both of us. Or so I had told myself, but lying here, almost dead, I could confess part of the truth to myself—going to Sizov meant claiming something I should not have.

The memories slipped like fish in my mind. There had been years of training and unsavory business, all to be there when Dimi needed me. Now here he stood and this woman called him king—what had happened while I lay here dreaming?

An angry red scar with a black sigil in its center marked my chest. I touched the raised edges, feeling no pain.

A knife wound would be smaller. It was as if she'd opened my chest and neatly plucked out my heart.

The woman had wanted a promise from me before she healed me. I had almost recognized her. Not like someone I knew personally, but someone important enough in Tal for the spymaster I worked for to keep an eye on.

Words surfaced, the shimmering fishes jumping, and for each one I caught something returned.

A bargain—she'd asked for someone I had not ever intended to have.

My ears popped, as if I was the one under water, and it all returned.

"Your first born, and I'll do whatever I can to repair you," Popova had said.

Two of her gigantic grandsons held me down.

Their faces swam before my vision as I shook my head, as much in denial as confusion.

"I'll become her guardian and arrange her marriage. All benefits will go to me. This engagement you'll stay out off," she continued, ignoring my surely drugged state. "Nothing too bad. And you'll have your life. Or as near as I can get."

"The pain…" I pleaded.

"Yes, it's just a bargain away."

At that I nodded. Anything to make the tearing in my chest end. I had fathered no child. Never planned to.

Her strong fingers clenched around my shoulder, saying, "For your life, you'll give me one. A first-born child, daughter or son, to foster and marry away as my own. You have one month until the magic runs out." She smiled. "And don't think killing yourself early will serve as payment. You'll live to fulfill your contract, and if your time runs out and your child isn't on my doorstep, you both will die."

Fear shook me as much as pain. The scar confirmed my payment.

Killing myself...

Dimi threw his arms around me, joy and astonishment painted across his usually serious face, while whatever I had in place of a heart sank. Behind him an older, dark-skinned woman smirked, golden teeth I'd heard tales of gleaming.

My first-born child.

A redhead I'd let go.

Pregnant.

A wailing, dark skinned, tiny, perfect newborn.

The pieces connected. I had not thought I had a child of mine to barter with, had only wanted the pain to stop, and never considered that I once claimed the daughter of another man as my own.

Panic centered me like pain had not.

I had sold Yeva, Ansa's daughter—*my daughter*—to the Witch of Lowtown.

The Tale of Cinderella

Cinderella has a thousand versions and many different origin tales. Some claim the original came from China to Europe, while others say it's the ancient Greek story of Rhodopis. The most famous ones today are derived from the French version by Charles Perrault published in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* in 1697, or *Aschenputtel* by the Brothers Grimm in their folk tale collection *Grimms' Fairy Tales* in 1812 (where the epigraph comes from).

Some just think of Disney—blue dresses, pumpkins, and talking mice.

No version is truer than any other; that's what I love about fairy tales. They are oral tales that travel through time and space, morphing to their surroundings but—mostly—keeping the moral. Cinderella is the tale of rags to riches, of the kind, downtrodden girl catching the eye of the prince, and the hardships of blended families—for some, the ultimate fantasy.

While I always enjoyed the tale, I minded how shallow the prince was and how unsuited Cinderella was to become the future queen of Fairy Tale Land. I minded how the three sisters never grew past the roles their parents cast them in, and how, in the end, having small feet was the deciding factor (I have rather large ones).

In Vanya and Dimitri's tale, I tried to take the parts I loved and, by mashing them together with a fantasy city on the brink of change, transform the parts I didn't.

I hope you enjoyed it.

About Liv Strom

Liv is raising three children on fairy tales.

For the last ten years, she has lived in Zurich, Switzerland, and works as a management consultant reorganizing Swiss banks, using her planning and goal setting obsession both professionally and privately. Her main writing companion is her wild beagle, Amazing Louis of the Whispering Hunters (he came with the name and a long and proud pedigree).

Her stories have appeared in *Mystery Weekly*, *Hexagon SF Magazine*, and *Timeless 2 anthology* by Dragon Soul Press—and many more depending on when you are reading this. Her debut novel, *The Last Spiritwalker*, is an adult dark contemporary fantasy for readers who enjoy mythology and don't mind a bit of gore.

You can find Liv's latest publications and posts about her publishing journey at http://www.livstromwriters.com

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